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IBTS Hughey Lectures, November 3, 2014 and Conference on Convictional Theologies, November 4-6, 2014

The Hughey Lectures will be delivered by Dr Curtis Freeman, Director and Research Professor at the Baptist House, Duke University. The title of the lectures is **Undomesticated Dissent.**

Lecture 1: The Dissenting Conscience
Lecture 2: The Dissenting Church
Lecture 3: The Dissenting Christ

Prof Dr Freeman will examine these themes by looking at the Canon of Dissent in English Protestantism. Specifically, he will look at the way this canon has been memorialised in Bunhill Fields, the Dissenter burial grounds in London. By looking at the three memorials to three great voices of dissent in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, John Bunyan, Daniel Defoe, and William Blake, he will explore how they give voice to these major themes of Dissenters.

The Hughey Lectures will be followed by the **Conference on Convictional Theologies** which will celebrate 90 years of James Wm McClendon's life witness and theological thought. It will engage in different streams of convictional theologising of Baptists, Mennonites, and other adherents of the Radical Reformation. Guided by the titles of McClendon's three-volume Systematic Theology, the conference will be organised along the themes of Ethics, Doctrine, and Witness.

Call for papers: until May 30, 2014, to be sent to Parushev@ibts.eu

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Editorial

This edition of the *Journal of European Baptist Studies* has, yet again, more pages than is normal as we record our departure from Prague to Amsterdam. In January 2014 we held our first significant IBTS event in Amsterdam, hosting our Research Colloquia. Two of the contributions to this edition of the *Journal* arise directly out of that event.

IBTS, an institution on the move, is so pleased to conclude this fourteenth volume with four different, but thought provoking, contributions from leading Baptist contextual theologians in Europe.

Our incoming IBTS Rector, Stuart Blythe, has an undoubted passion for developing and refining the ‘art’ of preaching within our baptistic communities across Europe, and his article, delivered with much acclaim as a seminar at our research colloquia, deserves reflection and reaction.

Our IBTS Academic Dean, Lina Andronovienė, in her inimitable way, approaches the interesting thought of Christians and humour.

Simon Oxley is the doyenne of Baptist educationalists in Europe, having served at the highest levels of the World Council of Churches, and he is still totally committed to the formation of local Baptist pastors in their context. So, we value his reflections and hopefully will learn from them.

Finally, Tim Mountain, who serves on the lecturing team of the Northern Baptist Learning Community in Manchester, offers some timely insights on the topic of spiritual formation and spiritual sustenance.

We believe that in this issue of our *Journal* we celebrate what we have always sought to achieve over the past fourteen years – first rate peer-reviewed articles by European baptistic theologians which are relevant to the life and ministry of the Baptist community within Europe and the Middle East.

Keith G Jones
Senior Research Fellow, IBTS

Collaborative Preaching as Community Theatre

Stuart Blythe

In this article I will argue that collaborative preaching can be understood as an expression of community theatre. This will be tricky. It involves discussing three potentially unfamiliar and contested categories: collaborative preaching, preaching as performance, and collaborative preaching as community theatre. I want, therefore, to issue some disclaimers. Firstly, I present this article from the specificity of my own context. I am a Scottish Baptist minister and a teacher of homiletics influenced by theories and theologies of preaching associated with the 'New Homiletic'. The applicability of what I say to other contexts, I will leave to those who belong to them. Secondly, I approach this subject as a preacher looking for a conversation partner in performance studies. Thirdly, I think that collaborative preaching is only one expression of preaching and that different contexts and purposes require different approaches. Fourthly, in keeping with the nature of collaborative preaching, I offer this argument as a 'playful proposal'. I am putting it out there for conversation. I believe in the argument but it is not yet a conviction. In turn this allows me to defend weaknesses by saying, 'Good point I still have to look at that!' With these disclaimers I will advance my argument in three moves. One, I will introduce and develop the idea of collaborative preaching. Two, I will introduce and defend the notion that preaching is a performance although I will critique the adequacy of some approaches to describe all forms of preaching. Three, I will demonstrate connections between community theatre and collaborative preaching.

Collaborative Preaching

Collaborative preaching is preaching in which preachers invite the active voiced participation of others into the preaching process. These others can come from the congregation and perhaps even from beyond. Collaborative preaching is therefore an alternative to monologue sermons created and delivered by one person. To be sure, it can be argued that all sermons involve the participation of the congregation as they listen, inwardly consider, and respond to what is said in faith and action. To anticipate the later connection, performance theorist Baz Kershaw would support the idea that there is no such thing as a totally passive 'audience'.

> The totally passive audience is a figment of the imagination, a practical impossibility; and, as any actor will tell you, the reactions of audiences influence the nature of a performance. It is not simply that the audience affects emotional tone or stylistic nuance: the spectator is engaged fundamentally in the active construction of meaning as a performance event proceeds. In this sense performance is 'about' the transaction of meaning, a continuous negotiation

> between stage and auditorium to establish the significance of the signs and conventions through which they interact.[1]

Be this as it may, in collaborative preaching preachers intentionally invite others to be actively involved in the preaching process as partners and for their voices and views to shape the event. Such explicit involvement transcends the participation implicit in sermons prepared and delivered by a single voice.

The specific term collaborative preaching is probably most associated with the writer John S. McClure and his book *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet*.[2] In a later book he helpfully summarises the nature of the practice which he advocates:

> Collaborative preachers form small groups of laypersons, from within and outside the church, who meet with the preachers to discuss biblical, theological, and experiential materials for the upcoming sermon…The preacher takes careful notes during the process of sermon brainstorming and prepares the sermon so that it resembles both the form and message of the collaborative brainstorming process. After the sermon is preached, preachers return to these groups for feedback and to begin the process again. In some cases, the names of those participating in these groups are published in bulletins so that feedback will come into the group by way of all those responsible for the sermon. The brainstorming groups change regularly to avoid establishing an in-group. The goals of this type of preaching are many: educating congregations on what sermons are and how they function in the community, increasing ownership of the ministry of proclamation in the church, teaching the Bible, widening preaching's audience, promoting a public form of theology in the pulpit, and symbolizing a collaborative form of leadership in the church.[3]

The strength of McClure's approach is that he offers a concrete practice in which members of the congregation play an active part in shaping particular sermons. McClure's approach can be developed in at least two directions. The first of these relates to the supporting theory and theology of collaborative preaching. In addition to McClure's own work the theory and theology of collaborative preaching is advanced by writers such as Lucy Atkinson Rose[4] and O. Wesley Allen Jr.,[5] albeit under the rubric of 'conversational preaching'.[6] With McClure these writers stand within the postmodern turn in the New Homiletic.[7] These writers, however, are not simply interested in postmodern communicative concerns but also with the nature of the ecclesiology different approaches to preaching reflect and create. Allen, therefore, before discussing his ‘conversational homiletic’ discusses a ‘conversational ecclesiology’.[8] To put that differently, he starts his theological thinking about preaching with theological thinking about the nature of the church as a community of believers engaged in conversations.

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[1] Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 16-17.

[2] John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995).

[3] John S. McClure, *Preaching Words: 144 Key Terms in Homiletics* (London: WJKP, 2007), pp. 13-14.

[4] Lucy Rose Atkinson, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: WJK, 1997).

[5] O. Wesley Allen Jr., *The Homiletic of All Believers: A Conversational Approach* (Louisville: WJK, 2005).

[6] Enoh Šeba discusses some of the similarities and differences between a variety of the authors who support collaborative preaching in 'Exploration of Contemporary "Dialogical Preaching" An Attempt at Evaluation from the Perspective of Croatian Baptists', Unpublished Magister Dissertation 2011, IBTS.

[7] Alan Kelcher, 'Conversational Preaching: The First Postmodern Homiletics?' in *The Academy of Homiletics: Papers for the Annual Meeting* (St Louis: Academy of Homiletics, 2001), pp. 393-401.

This ecclesiological trajectory of the theory and theology of collaborative preaching resonates with and invites contributions from those who claim a historic tradition of understanding the congregation as a hermeneutical community. Accordingly, Julie Alliman Yoder’s chapter in the book *Anabaptist Preaching* is entitled: ‘Collaborative Preaching in the Community of Interpreters’.[9] Here she relates the practice of collaborative preaching to the activities of at least some sixteenth century Anabaptists when they would listen and respond to one another’s sermons. In her discussion of sixteenth century Anabaptist preaching she cites Cornelius J. Dyck as she claims that ‘One of the great sins for church leaders was to be accused of “running alone”’.[10] Leo Hartshorn in his book *Interpretation as Communal and Dialogical Practices: An Anabaptist Perspective* also argues that ‘The sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement manifested dialogical forms of interpretation and proclamation’. [11] Hartshorn, with an ecclesiological concern for the congregation as a hermeneutical community, associates the practice of collaborative preaching with John Howard Yoder’s ‘hermeneutic of peoplehood’ and James Wm. McClendon’s ‘baptist hermeneutic’.[12] Interestingly, McClure himself makes a link between the type of preaching he is advocating and the ‘theologians of communal practice’ including ‘McClendon’.[13] In their writings neither Julie Alliman Yoder nor Hartshorn are claiming that collaborative preaching finds common contemporary expression in the churches they belong to. They are, however, seeking to encourage such preaching in their tradition with reference to the historic ecclesiology and attendant practices of that tradition. In this way they make a particular believers’ church contribution to the wider theory and theology of collaborative preaching.

The second main way in which McClure’s notion of collaborative preaching can be developed is with respect to the nature of the activity which can be described as collaborative preaching. Despite what McClure, Rose, and Allen write about collaborative preaching, they yet conceive the preaching event at the point of delivery as a monologue. McClure writes, ‘I will not suggest that preachers actually hold conversations from the pulpit or that they attempt two or three party "dialogue sermons"'.[14] While he seeks to ensure the sermon is '*embedded within, and represents an actual interactive, multi-party communication event*' at the point of delivery it is 'a noninteractive, single-party communication event'.[15] In essence McClure's approach invites participation at the point of sermon preparation and not at the point of delivery and response. Even the feedback he proposes is given at the point of preparation for the next sermon.

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[8] Allen, *Homiletic*, p. 16.

[9] June Alliman Yoder, ‘Collaborative Preaching in the Community of Believers’, in *Anabaptist Preaching: A Conversation Between Pulpit, Pew and Bible*, David B. Greiser and Michael A. King (eds.) (Telford: Cascadia, 2003), pp. 108-120.

[10] Cornelius J. Dyck, ‘The Role of Preaching in the Anabaptist Tradition’, *Mennonite Life* 17, no. 1 (January 1962), p. 23, cited in Yoder, ‘Collaborative’, p. 109.

[11] Leo Hartshorn, *Interpretation and Preaching as Communal and Dialogical Practices: An Anabaptist Perspective* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 2006), p. 44.

[12] Ibid., pp. 118-136.

[13] John S. McClure, ‘Collaborative Preaching from the Margins’, *Journal for Preachers*, (Pentecost, 1996), footnote 5, p. 41, italics McClure.

Allen also argues that the sermon at the point of delivery should be a monologue.[16] He sees preaching in the context of the liturgy as a rightful expression of 'presentation' over and against the 'shared work' of the congregation.[17] He criticises and resists ideas of dialogue and conversation as part of the delivery or response to sermons in the context of worship.[18]

Rose also indicates a commitment to monologue preaching although shows some greater openness than Allen to alternative approaches:

> In discussing preaching as a conversation between the preacher and the congregation, I do not mean to imply that other worshippers beside the preacher should speak during the time set aside in a service of worship for the sermon. Conversational sermons are not 'dialogue sermons' or 'interactive sermons,' although these forms might lend themselves to conversational preaching.[19]

In addition, again albeit tentatively and perhaps under the weight of her own argument, she indicates some support for the idea of 'an official forum time either within the service of worship or immediately thereafter as an opportunity for worshippers to voice their personal responses to the sermon'.[20]

In contrast to the apparent reticence of McClure and his colleagues to support congregational participation in preaching at the point of delivery and response, writers who claim the ecclesiological tradition of the hermeneutical community are rightly bolder in their suggestions for collaborative practice. Hartshorn argues that 'Communal dialogue was more of a practice than a theory within early Anabaptism'[21] and with some sense of irony opines:

> Conversational preaching, by logical definition, would seem to call for, or at least allow for, occasions when the sermon itself involves more than an 'implied conversational partner' and includes actual conversation with real dialogue partners within the sermon.[22]

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[14] McClure, *Roundtable*, p. 8.
[15] McClure, 'Collaborative', p. 39.
[16] Allen, *Homiletic*, p. 39.
[17] Ibid., p. 37.
[18] Ibid., pp. 6-7.
[19] Rose, *Sharing*, p. 96.
[20] Ibid., p. 130.
[21] Hartshorn, *Interpretation*, p. 211
[22] Ibid., p. 207.

He argues for the development of 'methodologies' for such preaching.[23] Baptist/Anabaptist writers Sian and Stuart Murray Williams provide such methodologies. Building upon their understanding of the variety of communication methods found in Scripture, historical work into the nature of Anabaptist hermeneutics, contemporary critiques of monologue sermons, and postmodern communication concerns, they offer a range of 'multi-voiced' opportunities related to preaching.[24] These opportunities include congregational participation at the point of preparation. They go far beyond this, however, indicating ways in which the congregation can participate at the point of delivery and in response to sermons in the context of worship. Suggestions include allowing interruptions and facilitating reflection and discussion during sermons and encouraging discussion and questions and answers in response to sermons.

Collaborative preaching, therefore, is preaching in which preachers invite the active voiced participation of others into the preaching process. The theory, theology, and practice as advanced by McClure, however, can be advanced by other writers. In this respect the understanding of collaborative preaching I am introducing here is that it is a practice in which preachers seek the involvement of the congregation in the making and interpretation of the meaning of sermons. This participation can be at one or various stages of the preaching event: preparation, delivery, response. These qualifications notwithstanding McClure will remain the primary, though not exclusive, writer to whom I will refer in this article as I discuss collaborative preaching as community theatre.

Having introduced and developed the idea of collaborative preaching I will now proceed to the second stage of my argument. In this second stage I will introduce and defend the concept of describing preaching in performance terms.

Preaching as Performance

To describe preaching in performance terms is not new. This said, for many the term performance continues to have pejorative connotations when applied to preaching. It can be associated with unhelpful and unattractive dimensions of preaching, 'such as focussing mainly on the preacher, or on theatricality, or on entertainment, on things that distract from the Word'.[25] One theorist, H. Herbert Sennett, expresses the difficulty as follows:

> The paradox between preaching (a serious issue for Christians) and performance (an assumed way of acting for the pleasure of others) is most intriguing. Can

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[23] Ibid., p. 211.

[24] Stuart and Sian Murray Williams, *Multi-Voiced Worship* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2012), pp. 63-87.

[25] Paul Scott Wilson, 'Preaching, Performance and the Life and Death of "Now"', in *Performance in Preaching: Bringing the Sermon to Life*, Jana Childers and Clayton J. Schmit (eds.) (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), pp. 37-38.

> someone be serious about the message and present themselves as a 'performer' at the same time?[26]

The difficulty and paradox acknowledged, there is a body of contemporary homiletical literature in which writers positively present preaching in performance terms. A review of this literature demonstrates that these writers variously defend preaching as performance in relation to: the social sciences, etymology, history, Scripture, art, and theology.

I think these writers are correct in their advocacy of preaching as performance. For me the question is not whether preaching is a performance? The question is what type of performance is any particular preaching event? I recognise, however, the continued resistance to the term. This being the case, I offer the following brief defence of preaching as performance drawing on the insights of performance studies and the preaching as performance writers.

According to Richard Schechner, a leading theorist in the discipline of performance studies:

> 'Being' is existence itself. 'Doing' is the activity of all that exists, from quarks to sentient beings to supergalactic strings. 'Showing doing' is performing: pointing to, underlining, and displaying doing. 'Explaining "showing doing"' is performance studies.[27]

Following this definition, insofar as preaching is an activity of 'showing doing', it is a performance. Of course, in so far as all human behaviour can be so defined, it can be argued that if everything is a performance then nothing is really a performance. Jan Cohen-Cruz, another performance theorist, is helpful here. In her definition she introduces a greater sense of the intentional and public nature of activities which can be defined as performance. She writes that a performance is: 'expressive behaviour intended for public viewing' or again is 'heightened behaviour intended for public viewing'.[28] Despite these modifications to Schechner's perhaps more general definition it would still seem quite appropriate to describe preaching as a performance in these terms.

Carrying the argument forward, Richard F. Ward draws on performance and communication theory to demonstrate the suitability of describing preaching as a performance He does so with reference to the etymology of the word. On the one hand he indicates that 'per/formance', means literally 'form coming through'.[29] On the one hand performance from 'the Old French *par* + *fournir*, means to 'carry through to completion'.[30] He argues that both this '*means*' and '*end*' are precisely what happens in the preaching event.[31] In preaching the sermon comes as a form comes through the body of the preacher to find its completion in a preached word. He writes, 'Preaching is a performance of the sermon, that is, a vocal and physical action through which the sermon becomes form and image'.[32]

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[26] H. Herbert Sennett, Ph.D, e-mail correspondence with author, 12 November 2007.

[27] Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge: 2006), p. 28.

[28] Jan Cohen-Cruz, 'Introduction', in Cohen-Cruz, *Radical*, pp. 1-6, 1 and Jan Cohen-Cruz, *Local Acts: Community-Based Performance in the United States* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2005), p. 1.

[29] Richard F. Ward, *Speaking from the Heart: Preaching with Passion* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2001=1992), p. 77.

[30] Ibid., p. 77.

These etymological observations with respect to preaching as performance find supportive theological reflections in the direction of God's self-revelation in the incarnation. Here the work of Charles Bartow is helpful as he advocates preaching as a divine/human event in keeping with the divine/human nature of God's self-performance, in Jesus Christ. He states, 'Jesus Christ…is not only the definitive locus of *actio divina*, he is also the locus of *homo performans*. True humanity is found in him'.[33] In turn, when preachers come as *homo performans* to the Scriptures to preach, they can expect a meeting with the *actio divina* in 'a conflagration of love'.[34] It is not just the preacher who comes as *homo performans* but also the congregation in the act of listening. When the preacher and congregation come together, therefore, in engagement with the performance of the Scriptures, they 'come face to face with the self-disclosure of the divine'.[35]

Such arguments illustrate that positive rather than pejorative connections are possible in a number of directions between the language of performance and the practice of preaching. This case is strengthened further when preaching is discussed as performance in more artistic terms.

In describing preaching as performance in artistic terms the preaching as performance writers draw comparisons with other artistic performances such as painting, music, dance, film, storytelling, poets, and comedians. One favoured approach, however, is to compare preaching with the drama and ritual of theatrical performance. Jana Childers is among the authors who explicitly promote the analogue of preaching and theatre as she asserts:

> They share the essential characteristics and qualities that can be said to be true of art in general: interest and integrity are requisite; distance plays a role; they are mimetic, usually nemetic and may be prophetic as well. In addition, like all performance arts, theatre and preaching are communal in nature and empathy-based.[36]

In turn, resisting the distinction between 'actors who act' and 'preachers who preach' she writes:

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[31] Ibid., p. 77, italics Ward.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Charles L. Bartow, *God's Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation* (Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997) ,p. 95, italics Bartow.

[34] Ibid., p. 96.

[35] Ibid., p. 122.

[36] Jana Childers, 'Making Connections: Preaching as Theatre', *The Journal of Religion and Theatre*, 4 (2005), pp. 1-7, http://www.rtjournal.org/vol_4/no_1/childers.html, accessed 25 October 2007, 3.

> As artists who operate in the mimetic/nemetic world, they have much in common. And while the question of whether there is anything actors may wish to learn from preachers is an open one, it is clear that there is much preachers may learn from actors.[37]

The 'much' that Childers thinks preachers can learn from actors ranges from the physical aspects of the use of voice and body in delivery,[38] to knowing what is required in order to give an 'authentic' and 'honest' rendition of a text.[39] Sennet, another author who makes a direct connection between actors and preachers notes, among other things, that both have to perform regularly 'on demand' and have to perform in keeping with the 'conventions' of the expected performance.[40] Again in making the connection Sennet's concern is that preachers can learn from actors.

Critique

To be sure, not all of the preaching as performance writers make the connection between preaching and theatre in this explicit way. Be this as it may, in much of the literature there is an implicit if not explicit assumption. On the one hand the assumption is that preaching consists of a preacher delivering a monologue sermon in the context of a liturgical assembly in a building set apart for that purpose. On the other hand the assumption is that that theatre consists of a performer on a stage before an audience in a specially designated building. This double assumption is understandable. It refers to preaching and to theatre in a way we are familiar with. The comparison between these types of preaching and theatre works as the preaching as performance writers demonstrate. Yet, it is also a limited comparison. It is limited in that it narrows the understanding of what constitutes preaching to only one particular expression. It is also limited in that it narrows the understanding of what constitutes theatrical performance to only one particular expression. As a consequence, in order to develop performance understandings of alternative forms of preaching, it is necessary to go beyond the understanding of theatre as advanced by the preaching as performance writers. In this respect I have argued elsewhere that open-air preaching cannot be understood as traditional in-theatre performance but can be helpfully understood as 'radical street performance'.[41] Following on from this, I argue here that collaborative preaching cannot be understood as traditional in-theatre performance but as community theatre.

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[37] Childers, 'Making', p. 3.

[38] Jana Childers, *Performing the Word: Preaching as Theatre* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), pp. 57-77, 114-116,

[39] Ibid., p. 51.

[40] Herbert Sennett, 'Preaching as Performance: A Preliminary Analytical Model', *The Journal of Religion and Theatre*, 2:1 (2003), pp. 141-156, 143.

[41] Stuart Blythe 'Open Air Preaching as Radical Street Performance', Unpublished PhD thesis, 2009, University of Edinburgh.

Collaborative Preaching as Community Theatre

In the previous sections I have introduced and developed the definition of collaborative preaching and introduced and defended the concept of preaching as performance. I have also argued that alternative approaches to preaching require alternative analogues than traditional theatre if they are to be understood in performance terms. In this section I will now discuss and demonstrate some of the connections between community theatre and collaborative preaching.

In some countries and contexts the term community theatre indicates theatrical productions of traditional plays put on by non-professional/amateur theatre companies. Here, however, I use the term to refer to ‘theatrical activity facilitated by professionals but that springs from, and involves, a local community’.[42] This definition of community theatre is in keeping with what performance theorist Cohen-Cruz calls ‘Community-based Performance’. Her definition has the advantage that it includes a wide variety of performance types as possible outcomes of the community collaboration including dance, music, storytelling, protest and what she calls other ‘heightened behaviour intended for public viewing’.[43] This broader definition of theatre beyond a play is certainly what a number of authors mean when they discuss community theatre and is in keeping with my own understanding here.

Community theatre is a global phenomenon. Historically it includes the activities of groups such as the Philippines Educational Theatre Association (PETA) founded in 1967, Welfare State International, a UK based group founded in 1968, and the Stut Theatre group in the Netherlands founded in 1977. The activities of the latter (worth mentioning as IBTS relocates to Amsterdam) have included working with different communities to highlight issues of poor housing, disability in the workplace, women’s issues, and inter-ethnic tension. While following no particular style from early on it became a feature of Stut productions to use people from the communities they were focussing on as actors in the productions they staged.[44]

At this point an initial if somewhat theoretical connection can be made between such community theatre and collaborative preaching in relation to ritual and art. Cohen-Cruz writes, ‘Any community-based performance is situated somewhere between ritual and art’.[45] Drawing on the work of Schechner, Cohen-Cruz describes ritualistic performances as those which are concerned with efficacy rather than entertainment and ‘are created with a community to serve a social or spiritual function’.[46] Rituals describe the sort of things that happen in church services and are viewed as stable and reinforcing of identity and tradition.[47] In contrast to ritual Cohen- Cruz presents art as that which asks questions, engages critically, opens up possibilities, and changes perspectives. Art is as committed to the new as to the old and can also present familiar things in a new way.[48] In the regular context of worship and preaching we have practices which in these terms might be described as community ritual performing and proclaiming the communities shared beliefs and truth. Collaborative preaching, however, invites into this ritual through the collaboration of others the potential for question and critique opening up creativity and the new. Rose in fact argues for an artistic understanding of conversational preaching whereby preaching is an art that searches for meaning: 'And the process of creating and interpreting becomes heuristic; yielding unexpected discoveries'.[49] If, therefore, community theatre involves the combination of community ritual and artistic creativity both of these are indeed to be found in the practice of collaborative preaching.

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[42] Kenneth Pickering and Mark Woolgar, *Theatre Studies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), p. 189. The term ‘professional’ is somewhat problematic but this serves as a working definition. Some of the power and authority issues related to the role of the ‘professional’ and the local community will be discussed later.

[43] Cohen-Cruz, *Local*, p. 1.

[44] Eugene van Erven, *Community Theatre: Global Perspectives* [Kindle] (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 59.

[45] Cohen-Cruz, *Local*, p. 81.

[46] Ibid., pp. 5, 84.

The above connection indicates that the association between community theatre and collaborative preaching can be developed in a variety of ways. Here I will develop the connection in relation to what theorist Petra Kuppers highlights as being three dominant features of the yet varied practice of community theatre. These are: It is **communally created**, gives attention to the **process as well as the product**, and it is a **political labour**. [50]

Communally Created

The first dominant feature which Kuppers identifies is that community theatre is communally created. Community theatre aims to provide performances 'for' and 'with' the community.[51] The term community can be problematic but in general terms the community are those with a shared primary identity or those who gather to explore a common theme.[52] In various ways and to greater and lesser extents these communities provide the sources and inspiration for the content, performers for the presentation, and audiences to give response, feedback, and action.[53]

One strategy in devising the performance involves members of the community involved in not simply conversation and sharing stories but in improvisation and role play to deepen comment and interpretation. Out of these activities the 'text' of the performance is created. Some performances include 'verbatim' comments from the improvisations.[54] These processes can help create identification with the community among whom the performance will be staged.

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[47] Ibid., pp. 84-86.
[48] Ibid., pp. 86-87.
[49] Rose, *Sharing*, p. 113.
[50] Petra Kuppers, *Community Performance: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 4-6.
[51] Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling, *Devising Performance: A Critical History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), pp. 143-155.
[52] Cohen-Cruz, *Local*, pp. 2-5.
[53] The extent of community participation varies from group to group, Heddon and Milling, *Devising*, pp. 136-137.

Soul and Latin Theatre Group (SALT) which operated for a while in East Harlem in the late 1960s was formed by school pupils who sought professional help to develop community based performances. They created three performances which reflected upon the lives of the group and sought to change attitudes on several issues including the impact of drugs and poor schooling. Through the review of the performances which appeared in the New York Times it was clear that there was a strong connection, shared dialogue and interaction between young black and Puerto Rican performers and the audience of their peers. The reviewer noted that at one point during the performance an audience member shouted ‘I had a teacher like that once!’ in recognition and encouragement to the performers.[55]

In situations such as the above where local people are not simply the source of ideas for the performance but are actively involved in the performance:

> …people are what they act and act what they are…You don’t start from a text which actors then have to make their own. The actors have created the text themselves, they know how and why; they know what they want to play and what they want to tell their audience…[56]

Kuppers, in his articulation of the role of the community in Community Theatre, cites French Theatre Director Armand Gatti: ‘The theatre must enable people who have been deprived of a chance to express themselves to do so’.[57]

The involvement of the community at the various points of preparation, delivery, and response offer a source of ‘collective genius’, and inspiration to the professionals, be they called artists, facilitators, or directors, responsible for bringing the performances together.[58] In turn, these leaders do not see the community simply as a source to be exploited for their individual agenda. Rather the relationship is defined as one of ‘*reciprocity*’ and the concepts and language of ‘participation’ and ‘empowerment’ is common in the literature.[59]

As should be apparent from the earlier discussion the idea of community (congregational) involvement is central in the theory, theology, and practice of collaborative preaching. Perhaps not surprisingly, therefore, the language of participation, empowerment, and reciprocity is also used by the advocates of collaborative preaching.[60] McClure captures something of the strong essence of the communal nature of collaborative preaching when he writes:

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[54] Pickering and Woolgar, *Theatre*, p. 98.

[55] Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling, *Devising Performance: A Critical History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), p. 153.

[56] Erven, *Community*, p. 61.

[57] Armand Gatti, 1994, cited Kuppers, *Community*, p. 8.

[58] Cohen-Cruz, *Local*, p. 93.

[59] Ibid., pp. 93-95, quotation, 93, italics Cohen-Cruz.

[60] McClure, *Roundtable*, pp. 11-29, Allen, *Homiletic*, pp. 29-30,

> The word collaboration means ‘working together’. It implies a form of preaching in which preacher and hearer work together to establish and interpret the topics for preaching. They also decide together what the practical results of those interpretations might be for the congregation. The preacher, then goes into the pulpit and re-presents this collaboration process in the event of sermon delivery.[61]

There is a strong sense from the various writers that if collaborative preaching is anything it is communal.[62]

In practice McClure is more restrained than some of the examples of community theatre in terms of the actual participation he encourages restricting it to the point of preparation. While his goal is that the sermon represents the content and structure of the roundtable conversations he states that ‘It is only with permission and great pastoral sensitivity that you will ever use anything verbatim’.[63] He acknowledges, however, that in variations of his approach some preachers use video testimonials of group members during their sermons or allow group members to come forward and offer portions of the sermon.[64] These examples indicate that the full range of participation encouraged by some community theatre groups has a greater resonance with developments of McClure’s collaborative approach including those in the Anabaptist/Baptist traditions discussed above than with McClure’s original and more conservative proposals.

The process is as important as the product

The second dominant feature of community theatre which Kuppers identifies is that the process is as important as the product. For some community theatre groups there is a concern to produce a performance of high quality which enables members of the community to speak out publicly on issues of importance.[65] Many groups, however, put a great emphasis on the positive communal and individual benefits of people participating in performance activities. ‘Here the aim of the exercise is far less the performance product than the desire to forge a sense of community or to challenge a community through participation.’[66]

The idea behind this stress on process is that through participation with others in performance activities including role play, games, and improvisation, people can become critically aware of their social situations and be provided with the power to transform it.[67] In this respect many community based artists have been influenced on the one hand by the liberatory pedagogy of Brazilian Paulo Freire and on the other hand by the theatre techniques of his fellow countryman Augusto Boal.[68]

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[61] McClure, *Roundtable*, p. 48.
[62] E.g. Rose, *Sharing*, pp. 121-122; Allen, *Homiletic*, pp. 16-37.
[63] McClure, *Roundtable*, p. 61.
[64] John S. McClure, ‘Collaboration’ in *The New Interpreters Handbook of Preaching*, Paul Scott Wilson (ed.) (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), pp. 258-262.
[65] Heddon and Milling, *Devising*, pp. 137, 148.
[66] Ibid., p. 148.
[67] Kuppers, *Community*, p. 6.

One development of the above is community theatre companies that promote performance as 'social and personal intervention'.[69] This can include prison based work such as that carried out by the US group Living Stage. In this work the scenarios created are never performed to an outside audience but allow inmates to explore situations relevant to them.[70] Similar long term activity has been carried out by 'Living Stage' with other small groups such as teen-aged mothers with the goal that, through improvisation and complex scenarios, they can provide them with problem solving skills.[71] Although varied in expression, what the above approaches to community theatre have in common is that the process of participation is seen as important educationally and formatively as any end product which may communicate a particular message to a wider audience.

A similar concern for the process as much as the product can be observed among the advocates of collaborative preaching. For McClure it is the process of placing people face to face in conversation which can: 'slowly pry open the private realm by placing people in a context in which otherness, rather than homogeneity, is valued and taken seriously' (20). Indeed when McClure in his definition given above talks about the 'goals of such preaching' he is not primarily talking about the content or form of particular sermons but about sermons produced through a particular process of collaboration. It is the process of collaboration which in his thinking can have the impact of:

> educating congregations on what sermons are and how they function in the community, increasing ownership of the ministry of proclamation in the church, teaching the Bible, widening preaching's audience, promoting a public form of theology in the pulpit, and symbolizing a collaborative form of leadership in the church.[72]

Indeed he argues that it is through this approach to collaboration in preaching that preachers can, 'influence the ways that a congregation is "talking itself into" becoming a Christian community', because it is through conversations that communities are formed.[73]

While not necessarily discussed in these terms, one of the central concerns for the other collaborative preaching authors is also the process of preaching. This concern is more than one of 'style' but also more than one of how preaching is 'viewed'.[74] It is a matter of how preaching is practised and the way in which this practice reflects and can play a part in forming particular types of community. So, for example, Rose wants an approach to preaching that reflects the 'multivalent' nature of a congregation and challenges through its method the traditional gap between preacher and congregation indicating instead 'solidarity and mutuality'.[75] The process creates new 'power arrangements'.[76]Allen in turn wants an approach to preaching which reflects and enables the sermon to become 'a significant contributing factor to the ongoing conversations owned by the community'.[77] In such writings the way in which preaching is conceived and practised is clearly regarded as important as the content of any particular sermon in expressing and forming the ecclesiological nature of the congregations among whom the preaching takes place.

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[68] Cohen-Cruz, *Local*, p. 98.
[69] Heddon and Milling, *Devising*, p. 154.
[70] Ibid., p.155.
[71] Ibid.
[72] John S. McClure, *Preaching Words: 144 Key Terms in Homiletics* (London: WJKP, 2007), pp. 13-14.
[73] McClure, *Roundtable*, p. 50.
[74] Yoder, *Anabaptist*, p. 119, italics Yoder

Political Labour

The third dominant feature which Kuppers highlights concerning the nature of community theatre is its political nature. This political nature can be discussed on two fronts.

The first way in which community theatre can be regarded as political labour is in the desire to bring about socio-political change in wider society. It may be 'by no means universally true that devising with a community necessarily produces more politically explicit material'.[78] Yet many community theatre groups have sought to challenge the status quo and bring about socio-political change in society. This tendency is apparent in some of the groups already mentioned.

From a global perspective the previously mentioned PETA has been one of the most politically successful community theatre groups.[79] As a network of community based theatres it challenged the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos from 1967 until its fall in 1986. Subsequently it turned its interests to the impact of local, national, and global policies on the everyday life of citizens.[80]

In more general terms community theatre is political because it seeks to 'change the world'.[81] It does so by 'facilitating creative expression as a means to analyse and understand life situations, and to empower people to value themselves and shape a more egalitarian and diverse future'.[82]

The second way in which community theatre is a political labour is the way in which it seeks to critique the practices of traditional theatre. This critique, among other things, challenges the 'hierarchical' relationships of traditional mainstream theatre.[83] This involves, not least, reconfiguring the understanding of the relationship of the professional artist/facilitator to the community participants.[84] In practice artist/facilitators involved in community theatre appear to differ as to the extent to which they share decision making power, creative genius, and aesthetic control with the community participants.[85] One negotiated approach is artist/facilitators seek to view the community participants as partners, listening deeply and valuing the contributions which are made. In turn, however, the artist/facilitators bring their own individual genius, albeit fed by the community interaction, to the performances and also their expertise to enable people to discover and achieve what they want to do.[86] This does not, of course, remove all the tensions related to power and control. Yet it affirms a partnership based on dialogue and difference but with respect for what each brings. Accordingly:

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[75] Rose, *Sharing*, pp. 4-7, 21-22.

[76] Ibid., p. 97.

[77] Allen, *Homiletic*, p. 15.

[78] Heddon and Milling, *Devising*, p. 138.

[79] Zarrilli et al, *Theatre*, p. 433.

[80] Ibid., p. 434.

[81] Kuppers, *Community*, p. 8.

[82] Kuppers, *Community*, p. 6.

> Artists must be as sensitive to their differences from community participants as to the common ground they share. All involved must genuinely appreciate what the others bring to the collaboration, or why do it? [87]

The political nature of community theatre, therefore, involves renegotiating the power relationships between the professionals and the communities among whom they work in a more egalitarian direction.

In terms of the political concern to directly address issues and change society, the collaborative preaching authors do not have too much to say. It may be, to draw again from the world of community theatre, that the very diversity which such an approach encourages militates ‘against a clear political commitment’.[88] This said, McClure clearly supports the desire for ‘preaching that displays urgent prophetic, evangelical, and pastoral commitments’ in the face of ‘pressing environmental, social, and psychological issues’. [89] Yet, he argues, that rather than the lone voices of preachers ‘shouting in the wilderness’ what is required are communities empowered to engage with such issues like the ‘base Christian communities in Central America’.[90] McClure’s approach, therefore, resonates more with the community performance approaches which aim to empower people and communities through the process than the approaches which seek to produce a socially direct product.

With respect to the political dimension of reconfiguring relationships between the preacher (artist/facilitator?) and the congregational community more can be said. McClure’s book *The Roundtable Pulpit* has the subtitle, *Where leadership and Preaching Meet*. For him collaborative preaching is about modelling new forms of leadership. He wants to challenge ‘alienated forms of clergy-laity relationships’ where leadership can be 'formal, impersonal, and instrumental, centering on task accomplishment and conformity, to policies and rules'.[91] Like the community theatre practitioners he wants to challenge and change 'hierarchical patterns of relationship'.[92] In these patterns the interpretation of the Word is located in a professional guild.[93] In contrast he wants to create a context where 'power is shared' and people are 'instructed by one another's differences'.[94] While this resonates with some of the negotiations found in community theatre, the same tension remains of what then is the role of the 'professional'. McClure argues the preacher should function as 'host'. [95] As host they allow for a variety of voices to contribute and if necessary for the sermon to go in a different direction from the one the preacher would choose if it faithfully represents the community discussion.[96] Be this as it may, he argues, like some of the community theatre practitioners, that if the collaboration is genuine the professional (preacher) should bring their own distinctive contribution to the table:

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[83] Cohen-Cruz, *Local*, p.95.

[84] Ibid., p. 94.

[85] Kuppers, *Community*, pp. 95-102; Cohen-Cruz, *Local*, pp. 94-97.

[86] Cohen-Cruz, *Local*, pp. 92-96.

[87] Ibid., p. 95.

[88] Heddon and Milling, *Devising*, p. 138.

[89] McClure, *Roundtable*, p. 11.

[90] Ibid., p. 12.

> It is essential that preachers assert their own instructive 'otherness' as well. Preachers choose moments to express clearly their premises and thoughts. Otherwise the preacher would not be a presence *in the homiletical conversation*, only a referee or facilitator *of the conversation*. Preachers, as ministers of the Christian church, ensure that the homiletical conversation is rooted in the gospel story focussed on the mission of the church. They exercise leadership both by *welcoming* all followers as equals and by *engaging* them deeply *in* conversation about Jesus Christ and what it means to be a Christian in today's world.[97]

Following on from this the preacher seeks to 'persuade' the congregation of a particular direction but from a word rooted in the communal discernment process.[98] Rose, as already noted, is concerned to challenge the gap between preacher and congregation.[99] This gap she relates directly to issues of power.[100] In her own proposal she seeks a context of 'nonhierarchical' relationships.[101] This means challenging the idea that only the ordained should preach and she suggests they re-envision their role as those who ensure preaching occurs.[102] This would involve regularly inviting others 'particularly laity' to preach.[103] In so far as Rose thinks that sermons are essentially tentative 'interpretations' 'proposals' and 'wagers', issues of the authority of the preacher do not really come in to play to the same extent.[104] Yet, this approach also means that she seeks to protect the individual and biographical contribution of each preacher in the contribution they bring.[105] She asserts this over and against McClure's argument that sermons should be shaped not so much by the preacher but by the collaborative group discussions.[106] Despite all of this theory, however, it is not actually clear how some of this would work in practice where the real issues of power come into play.

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[91] Ibid., p. 20.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid., p. 22.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid., pp 25-29.
[96] Ibid., pp.56-57.
[97] Ibid., p. 54, italics McClure.
[98] Ibid., pp. 56-57.
[99] Rose, *Sharing*, p. 90.
[100] Ibid., pp. 97-98.
[101] Ibid., pp. 122-123.
[102] Ibid., p. 123.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Ibid., pp. 99-107.

Allen, in his discussion of the role of preaching, privileges the conversations of the community over that of the sermon. This said, he argues strongly that the ordained preacher brings something distinctive which should be recognised. This distinction lies in 'the training and equipment preachers bring with them'.[107] Their training, preparation, ordination allows them to see 'differently' and enables them to bring the experience of the whole of life into conversation with the Christian tradition.[108] In turn it is on this basis that congregations grant them 'privilege and authority'.[109] Yet this privilege and authority for Allen involves preaching serving the wider conversations.

With Allen, therefore, as with the other collaborative preachers, we see the political attempt to negotiate in a less hierarchical and more egalitarian direction the role of the 'professional' in relation to community while retaining something distinctive which the preacher brings. Similar ideological struggles are apparent among community theatre practitioners and the role of the artist/preacher.

Conclusion

The practice of collaborative preaching is an expression of community theatre in so far as the two practices find several points of connection regarding their emphases and concerns. These connections can be illuminating and, if pursued further, potentially instructive regarding alternative ways of facilitating congregational participation in the meaning making of sermons. The practice of collaborative preaching is one which does resonate with an Anabaptist/Baptist ecclesiological understanding of the hermeneutical community. Yet the comparison with community theatre highlights areas with which congregations may have to wrestle if they were to adopt this approach as part of their preaching approach. This is the case not least in relation to collaborative preaching as political labour and the questions it raises about the nature of the role and authority of preachers.

The Revd Dr Stuart Blythe, Rector-designate, IBTS.

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[105] Ibid., pp. 124-127.
[106] Ibid., p. 131, footnote 1.
[107] Allen, *Homiletic,* p. 45.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Ibid.

The Practice of Humour and our Spirituality: Some Reflections

Lina Andronovienė

> To everything is a season . . . a time to weep, and a time to laugh.[1]
>
> Angels can fly because they can take themselves lightly.[2]

The Danger of Saying ‘Yes’

The reason I started contemplating writing an article on the use of the gift of humour in our Christian journey lies in a request by the European Baptist Women’s Union to address this theme at their conference, ‘Stand Up and Live’ (Hannover, 29 May – 2 June 2013).[3] When Anniko Ujvari, now the President of the Union, approached me with this idea, I readily agreed – after all, I love humour, appreciate the art of jokes, and value a good laugh.

Then came the next stage. As I started to reflect on humour and its family – the twins joy and smile, the vivacious brother laughter, that candid sister irony[4] – I went to search for conversant partners in the IBTS library, which, as many of readers know, has ample resources in a number of areas. From the bibliographies checked, I already knew that the number of books published on the subject was rather modest, but there were some. However, what I found really surprising was that most of these books struck me as rather dull.[5] This also made me nervous that this article may also not escape such dullness. How is it that discussing humour can be boring? Perhaps it should not be surprising; there are other subjects which are difficult to capture, but simply are to be lived. The same can be said of humour as of joy: ‘Christian joy cannot be worked out from theory’.[6] Anyway, this did not exactly help as the conference dates started approaching. It was also not helped by the fact that I had signed up for talking about humour in an intercultural context, in English, with several translations happening right there in the seminar room. What was I thinking?!

The date of the conference arrived, the adrenaline kicked in, and it all turned out well. The good numbers attending for both of the sessions on humour was a pleasant surprise. Of course, I suspect some of those participants were simply tired and hoped for a few jokes to get them through the afternoon. This I did not take as an insult – lightening up our days is one of humour’s gifts. However, the conversation we were able to start in those seminars was also surprising in terms of the depth in considering the significance of humour for our lives and at times even the very survival of ourselves as followers of Christ, personally and communally. I am grateful to all those women who attended, contributed, or asked whether it would be possible to see some of those thoughts in writing. Here I am following a promise I made to some of them.

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[1] Eccl 3:1,3. All the Bible quotations in this article are taken from the NRSV.

[2] G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Catholic Way Publishing, 2013), p. 113.

[3] http://www.ebwu.org/index.php/en/ebwu-events/191-report-of-ebwu-conference-hannover-2013.

[4] The list of siblings could go on: mirth, sarcasm, wit, satire, parody, black humour, practical jokes, etc.

[5] It seems I am not the only one to struggle with this paradox: Peter Berger has also observed that ‘a good deal has been written about the phenomenon of humor, much of it in a very humorless vein’. Peter L. Berger, *Rumour of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1970), p. 69.

[6] Johann Baptist Metz, ‘Editorial’, in Johann Baptist Metz and Jean-Pierre Jossua (eds.), *Concilium: Fundamental Theology* Vol. 5, No. 10 (1974), p. 10.

The Problem of Definition, or What Does the Bible Say?

Humour is a fascinating phenomenon indeed. The Bible does not talk about it explicitly, which makes some consider humour to be ungodly, or at least not much related to an experience with God (and, as with many subjects, if we really want to, we can find Bible verses to support this). Such an attitude to humour has sometimes been presented as the orthodox position of the church.[7]

However, there may be another explanation as to why there is not much explicit discussion on humour in the Bible. That is, a bit like the existence of God, or our necessary embodiment as human beings, humour is simply presupposed: it is a given, and thus, as many self-evident things, not spoken of explicitly.[8] Indeed, it is not by chance that the Jews, the First Testament people of God, are so well known for their remarkable ability to laugh, and first of all to laugh at themselves – even, or perhaps especially, in the face of pain and suffering.[9]

Thus, if we only want to look carefully, we discover plenty of humour present in the Bible, in the form of irony, satire, parody, caricature, word play, etc. Think, for instance, of the story of Aaron explaining to Moses that the golden calf 'just happened' (Exod 32:24); or the discussion between Balaam and his donkey (Numbers 22:22-35); or Peter's miraculous release from prison only to be kept behind the door by Rhoda the maidservant (Acts 12:12-17).

The question of whether Jesus could have laughed, of course, may be a tempting one to indulge in as this could supposedly settle the question whether humour is a good – and ‘Christian’ – thing. As Karl-Josef Kuschel observes, however, this would be a case of the exegetical acrobatics we sometimes engage in to legitimise whatever we already believe in: in his words, ‘narrow Christian apologetic and theological jumping on the bandwagon with the slogan “Our Jesus too!”’.[10] Indeed, were one to engage in such activity, it would be easier to argue *against* humour. Scripture never says that Jesus laughed, but it does talk about him weeping.

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[7] Again, if we want to prove this, there are plenty of authorities to quote. Basil of Caesarea, for example, claimed that Christ never laughed (The Long Rules, 17, in *Patrologia Graeca*, 31:961C); John Chrysostom emphasised that as the Kingdom of God is inherited by groaning, this therefore makes human circumstances 'not the theatre for laughter' (*St Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew*. Post-Nicene Christian Library, Homily VI.6. http://sacred-texts.com/chr/ecf/110/1100014.htm (accessed 1 March 2014).

[8] Cf. an observation of a Baptist theologian, James Wm. McClendon Jnr, on the human nature as necessarily embodied: 'the Bible does not so much emphasize embodied selfhood as assume it, and the assumption itself is no longer self-evident' as our outlook has become so different from the worldview of the people of the First Testament. *Systematic Theology: Ethics, Volume I*, Revised Edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), p. 97.

[9] For an insightful comment on this, see Marc Tanenbaum, 'Humour in the Talmud', in Metz and Jossua (eds.), *Concilium*, pp. 142ff. An extensive use of humour has been a permanent feature of the Jews, and, as Tanenbaum notes, has been 'quintessentially the psychodynamic technique by which the Jewish people confronted and endured the sufferings and horrendous pain inflicted on them by the anti-Semitism that suffused Western society and culture, both Christian and secular, for the greater part of almost two thousand years of the diaspora' (ibid.) Tanenbaum also reflects on the potentially detrimental features of such humour, arising out of an adopted self-criticism in reaction to the derisive attacks of the (Christian) aggressors: 'Jews make jokes in order not to cry' (p. 143). I will pick up the theme of humour as consolation later on in this article.

Thus the intention of this article is not to prove, verse by verse, that there is plenty of humour in the Bible, although I am certainly not the first one to suggest that that indeed is the case. There are various works exploring the pervasive and surprisingly constant role of humour in the Old and the New Testaments.[11] There are also important theological themes to be considered in relation to God who laughs – whether the God of Psalm 37[12] or a Gnostic saviour who laughs because he has fooled his tormentors to believe that he was human and actually suffered.[13] My primary intention here, however, is to see what role humour can play in our Christian spirituality today.

Humour, it is sometimes observed, is what makes us different from animals – like us, they can play, but only humans laugh and perceive something as ‘funny’. Just as it is impossible to become human without a human community, so it is impossible to learn humour without being exposed to humour without the context of community. This is why later on in this article I will be referring to humour as a practice. We learn it as we grow and as we experience the jokes and the puns and the laughter of others. It seems to be an essential part of being created in the image and likeness of God. (In fact, some have mused that it is the devil who is incapable of having a sense of humour.)

Of course, at some point a question should be asked, ‘what *is* humour’? The answer is tricky, and always provisional. Laughter usually dies if a joke needs to be explained. Gerald Bessiere notes, ‘Humour has never allowed itself to be confined within a definition. It has always treated itself with “humour”’.[14] It is easier to point to a good example of humour and say, here it is; or to observe that ‘she doesn’t have a sense of humour’. We can also observe and note different shades of humour – dry wit, humour of jokes, silly giggling, comic actions, teasing, etc.

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[10] Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Laughter: A Theological Reflection* (London: SCM, 1994), p. 68.

[11] See, for instance, Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Laughing With God: Humor, Culture, and Transformation* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2008); Gérard Bessière, ‘Humour—A Theological Attitude?’ in Metz and Jossua (eds.), *Concilium*, pp. 81-95; Conrad Hyers, *The Cosmic Vision and the Christian Faith: A Celebration of Life and Laughter* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1981); Conrad Hyers, *And God Created Laughter: The Bible as Divine Comedy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1987); Jakob Jonsson, *Humour, Irony in the New Testament* (Leiden: Brill 1985); Athalya Brenner (ed.), *Are We Amused? Humour About Women in the Biblical Worlds* (London: T&T Clark, 2003); Kuschel, *Laughter*, Parts II and III.

[12] Kuschel, *Laughter*, pp. 57-59.

[13] Ibid., pp. 66-68.

[14] Bessière, ‘Humour—A Theological Attitude?’, p. 81.

Rather than trying to define it, we can try instead to notice the signs of humour. Here, laughter stands out as its common companion, and the two are often used synonymously. Although humour is not always expressed in laughter, it is one of its key indicators. Yet, as humour itself, laughter can have different purposes and motivations, and is not automatically a positive thing. Reflecting on the witness of the Old Testament, Kuschel notes two types of human laughter: ‘There is the sceptical unbelieving laughter of men and women at God, which can change into a liberating, joyful laughter with God; and there is the unconcerned, indeed sinful laughter of the fool, which will be silenced, since the seriousness of the wise is contrasted with the laughing fool.’[15] Once again we are reminded that we are dealing with a serious matter.

With this kind of reminder and admonition, I would like to proceed by reflecting on humour as a practice and on what I see to be its major functions in our personal and communal Christian journey. In reflecting on these functions, I will connect them to three virtues that are especially significant for its (healthy) use and development. In this, I am following a general approach which is often referred to as ‘virtue ethics’. Such an approach underlines the necessary contextuality of a particular tradition,[16] the identity of which arises out of the narratives that nurture the life of the communities and its people belonging to that particular tradition. It strives to identify those virtues which shape the character—individual and perhaps even more significantly, corporate character—befitting such a narrative and such a tradition.[17] I will look at three such virtues – love, hope, and courage. Each of them will be related to a particular function of the practice of humour: humour as a barrier; humour as celebration and consolation; and humour as a critique and the tool for opposing the wrong.

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[15] Kuschel, *Laughter*, p. 64.

[16] Broadly taken, it is the Christian tradition; even more specifically, I focus on a particular sub-tradition here named baptistic, free church, or the believer’s church—in other words, a tradition which follows in the footsteps of the Radical Reformation and has the task of the continuous transformation of the intentional community of disciples at its very core. An analysis of the theological tradition of baptistic (in McClendon’s terms, ‘baptist’) communities can be found in McClendon’s *Ethics*, pp. 17-34. McClendon sees such baptistic identity as characterised by such marks as: the treatment of the Bible seen to be the trustful guidance for both faith and life in direct narrative link of the particular community with the communities of the past and the future still to come; the voluntary nature of committing to such a believing community; discipleship under the lordship of Christ as the indispensable requirement, or cost, of such commitment; the necessarily communal nature of such discipleship; and witness to the way of Christ, both by word and by deeds, as the way of life of such community. For a related recasting of these same marks, see Parush R. Parushev, ‘Doing Theology in a Baptist Way’, in Teun van der Leer (ed.), *Doing Theology in a Baptist Way*, the Plenary Papers Collection of the Symposium (Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit, 2009 in English and Dutch), pp. 8-10, available electronically on http://www.baptisten.nl/upload/ParushevEng.pdf (accessed 5 October 2009).

[17] Such an approach in a broad sense follows the methodology of Alasdair MacIntyre; see his seminal *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) (2nd ed.). For a further elaboration on the contribution of MacIntyre’s work for Christian ethical thinking, see Nancey Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg, and Mark Thiessen Nation (eds.), *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics after MacIntyre* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997).

Humour as a Barrier

I start with a largely negative function involved in the practice of humour. It is not by chance that the Christian tradition has repeatedly seen humour to be unhelpful, if not dangerous.[18] Indeed, humour is not necessarily constructive, life-giving and life-affirming. For one thing, it can be our way of distancing ourselves from life's serious questions; reverting to jokes when in fact mourning is in order. This is a kind of deceiving ourselves – and others. Depth becomes too difficult a challenge, and humour then comes handy as a mask, a barrier to separate us from the deadly seriousness of life. It functions as a blockade, as when a potentially serious conversation is subverted, or quenched, by a diverting joke.

Some of us are especially prone to use humour as a defence against somebody getting too close to us, or indeed to subtly exclude others. That is probably why some felt that humour is out of place as far as Christianity goes. When not everybody can share in the joke, it creates a sense of isolation. Those laughing are in; others are out. Of course, such situations may arise inadvertently, but they can hurt nonetheless.

Humour can reflect an indication of superiority, as in the laughter of the one 'who knows'.[19] What is even more disturbing is the conscious use of humour to alienate: to issue a threat,[20] to mock, or to inflict a deliberate hurt. The question, of course, is whether such expressions can still count as humour (and so we are back to the challenge of definitions). Somewhere down the line, actions and intentions described above stop being humorous as they degenerate into a sinister attempt to hurt. Laughter becomes spiteful, and it becomes increasingly evident that it has stopped being funny.

That said, there are times when humour as a barricade has a legitimate use. Although as the followers of our crucified Lord, we are called to a life of vulnerability, there are times when creating a sort of barrier by making a humorous twist may be necessary: when one is being insulted; when someone else in one's presence is being insulted; when one needs to gain distance from a particularly difficult personal situation, etc. Such type of humour is likely to contain implicit criticism– a theme I will explore later.

The barrier brought by humour can also create a helpful distance between ourselves in a situation when our self threatens to become a bottomless pit of smallness. 'Humour is a quiver of transcendence within the weight of [humankind]', notes Bessière,[21] It reminds us that our own story is but a part of a much bigger narrative, and that we can only make sense of our own predicament by seeing it in proportion to the story of God and God's people. It helps us to make sense of life's incongruities – another theme to be explored later – and see ourselves in the light of those incongruities that are much greater than ourselves. 'Humour readily changes its area of activity and jumps into the disproportion between [people] and reality; it sets in motion interior freedom, it has a sense of the relative, it unknots absolutes which are not absolute except from a predetermined point of view. No [one's] word can escape its airy harassment.'[22] The best way to develop the practice of humour indeed is to learn to laugh at ourselves, and not to take ourselves *too* seriously.

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[18] One of the best illustrations of this view can be found in Umberto Eco's fictional dialogue between William of Baskerville and Jorge de Burgos, librarian of a Benedictine monastery, in *The Name of the Rose.* Says Jorge, the old monk, 'Laughter is weakness, corruption, the foolishness of our flesh' (Trans. William Weaver (New York: Hartcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), p. 474). For a thorough discussion of the dialogue, including its use of Aristotle's *Poetics*, see Kuschel, *Laughter*, pp. 22-42. We may also be reminded of the warning of Jesus as recorded in the Sermon on the Plain: 'Woe to you who laugh now!' (Luke 6:25b), or reflect on why Paul said that pranks do not belong to the gathering of the saints (Ephesians 5:4).

[19] Kuschel, *Laughter*, pp. 54-55.

[20] On this, see ibid., pp. 53-54. Kuschel reflects on Ps 2 as an example.

Yet how do we avoid hiding behind humour as a strategy – or even worse, not slipping into using it to hurt or manipulate others? I would suggest that for this function, the virtue of *love* is essential. I am not the first to note the connection between humour and love. Bessière asks:

> Have you noticed that humour and love get along very well together? This connivance must conceal some secret. Humour blossoms readily in those who love and know themselves to be loved. Like something that eases life.
>
> If I may risk a solemn affirmation, I would say that there is no love without humour. For love without humour underestimates the distance, and hence also the respect, and the infinite quest for encounter, between two beings.[23]

Love, then, being a serious matter as it is, can and ought to take a central place in all our joking, being both the test and the intent of humorous activities. However, love also needs the context of humour in order to celebrate life as it is – a place of not only tears and suffering, but also the arena where God's goodness is poured out, birthing joy. To both of these aspects of our human life I turn next.

Humour as Celebration and Consolation

This, at least on the surface, is very straightforward: humour and laughter are typically associated with good times. They indicate the occasions when life is perceived as good and acknowledged as such. And because, as adults, we struggle to laugh without reason, we consciously seek to entertain ourselves with something funny. Think of weddings, for example; there is often a humorous component in the programme (even in the most serious Baptist weddings in Eastern Europe I have taken part in!). Some of us particularly love comic situations; funny clips are created and watched, and people say, 'that was such a good time; I can't remember the last time I laughed so hard'.

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[21] Bessière, 'Humour—A Theological Attitude?' p. 90.

[22] Ibid., p. 91.

[23] Ibid., p. 89.

Yet, as noted earlier, Christians sometimes struggle with celebrating laughter. Perhaps this is so because we are not as comfortable with celebrating as we should be? One of my aunts used to be reprimanded because of smiling in the church service. What was worse, she was sitting in the choir, facing the congregation, and thus, she was told, showing a bad example to many others. Yet smiling is my aunt's most common and natural facial expression; she is usually described as 'the smiling lady'. She has been blessed with a smiling disposition in spite of many really trying life experiences, a paradox to which I will return below.

When I think of a good church, however, I always envision a community where we can laugh together. Otherwise, we have not yet become a community. Yes, the other necessary criterion is that we should be able to cry together; there is a great need for the church to embrace expressions of sadness and mourning. However, the two are connected, and here is why.

Humour is what in many ways keeps us going through difficult periods of life. It is a rather unexpected, but extremely powerful, God-given resource either for neutralising the source of suffering or transforming the experience of sufferers.[24] Human beings can laugh and cry at the same time; as recalled by many of those who have survived horrific forms of suffering, humour is a powerful companion of creative suffering.[25] It is nothing less than tragic that the church often forgets its gift and power.

Humour – and particularly, its expression in laughter, sometimes even laughter coming as if from nowhere in the most serious, solemn, even tragic moments – has a marvellous ability to lighten the atmosphere and to regain our dignity.[26] An ability to acquire a comical perspective on the situation helps us to cope with the contradictions of life, when things – and our lives – do not make sense. This is especially true when words seem powerless to address the situation; when explanations seem to ring hollow. At such times, we must guard ourselves against the temptation to force upon ourselves, and others, a reductionist (and therefore false) explanation of causes and effects. Reinhold Niebuhr has reflected on this inadequacy of serious words thus:

> The sense of humour is, in many respects, a more adequate resource for the incongruities of life than the spirit of philosophy. If we are able to laugh at the curious quirks of fortune in which the system of order and meaning which each life constructs within and around itself is invaded, we at least do not make the mistake of prematurely reducing the irrational to a nice system.[27]

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[24] As Daniel Day Williams notes, 'there is a communication in love which involves the play and laughter which come from suffering together the human condition'. *The Spirit and the Forms of Love* (New York/Evanston: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 118.

[25] See, for example Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Revised and updated ed. (New York: Washington Square Press, 1984), pp. 63-64.

[26] Andrew Greely, 'Humour and Ecclesiastical Ministry', in Metz and Jossua (eds.), *Concilium*, p. 138.

[27] Reinhold Niebuhr, 'Humour and Faith,' in *Discerning the Signs of the Times: Sermons for Today and Tomorrow* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), p. 126.

Given the prevalence of tragic edges and paradoxes in our human lives, the divine gift of humour has a continuous role to play. Peter Berger similarly noted that humour reflects and works with the fundamental discrepancy we inevitably experience in the world we inhabit.[28] That is why ‘comedy and tragedy are at root closely related’.[29] Humour helps us to hold our lives and its paradoxes together. It teaches us to treat these discrepancies and tragedies by ‘[providing. . .] yet another signal of transcendence – . . . in the form of an intimation of redemption’.[30]

Yet such an invitation to see the beginning of redemption and the triumph of goodness in the midst of evil, can seem impossible if not insulting. In fact, it probably *is* impossible – unless the virtue of hope is involved. It is hope which gives us the eyes to see the resurrection beyond the cross and the new life budding out of what looks like nothing but death. In this relation, Andrew Greely talks of the ‘humour of faith’:

> One laughs because one knows that no matter how desperate things are they are never serious in the ultimate sense. No matter how long things may go badly they will ultimately end well. No matter how tragic life might appear it is, in the final analysis, a comedy. . . . It is laughter that rocks the walls of hollow tombs. The force of it can roll back stones from those tombs, and the conviction of it assures resurrection.[31]

To this, I can add a personal experience. Some years ago, my home church was going through very difficult times. Those were the times of much anguish, pain, misunderstanding and hurt. I recall having to physically force myself to come to the worship services. It was very difficult, especially as the members of my own family were right at the centre of the conflict. I was not far from giving up, not so much on God but with the church.

What I found to be God-given and what made a very important difference in the situation – or rather, my attitude to it – was a little book called *The Sacred Diary of Adrian Plass*. It was written – surprisingly – by Adrian Plass, in the form of a diary in which Adrian records his musings about God, the life of his (very imperfect) church, and, though doing it very seriously, makes it nearly impossible for a reader not to chuckle through the whole book.[32] Adrian’s church seemed to be rather different from mine, but what I could see in it was people who, very similarly, were taking themselves very seriously – myself including. I also began to notice that not *everything* was as bad as I said it was; I began to see potential. The situation in my church did not change for a while, but Plass’ diary encouraged me to learn to laugh

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[28] Berger, *Rumour of Angels*, p. 69.

[29] Ibid., p. 70.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Greely, ‘Humour and Ecclesiastical Ministry’, p. 139.

[32] Adrian Plass, *The Sacred Diary of Adrian Plass Aged 37 ¾* (London: Fount/HarperCollins, 1987). Significantly, Plass wrote the book out of his own depressive struggle with church life.

(first of all, at myself), without that laughter turning bitter and hurtful. I could laugh and still love; and I could still hope.

Humour as Critique and a Tool for Opposing the Wrong

There is yet one more function of the practice of humour which seems to be constantly underemployed in our Christian life, and one which is badly needed for our times and our current struggles. A frequently forgotten gift of humour is that it can become a prophetic utterance.[33] By 'prophetic' I mean, first of all, the task of speaking truth to human power (wherever that power may reside – church included). Again, this is nothing new; there are plenty of examples in the Bible of prophetic laughing at those in power, the oppressors, the wicked, etc.

In such instances, the subversive nature of this practice can be recognised.[34] It 'breaks down the mould of thinking and provides a designated radically new alternative behavior pattern. . .'.[35] Think of 1 Cor 3:18-19 and ourselves as 'fools for Christ', which St Bernard and Francis of Assisi took further to call their own communities to become *ioculatores Domini* – the 'jesters of the Lord',[36] or which have been known as the 'holy fools' in the Russian Orthodox tradition.[37] This may be especially significant for churches such as ours – baptistic, or free churches, or 'sects and fringe groups' in the words of Dorothee Sölle and Fulbert Steffensky.[38] As small groupings in comparison to state churches, we can hardly expect our convictions to be adopted by society, but we can speak prophetically into the situations of trouble and wrong, employing humour to both draw attention to and to critique the *status quo*.[39]

There are both biblical and historical examples to use as inspiration. We may feel too far removed from some very strange, 'crazy' acts of the Old Testament prophets *a la* Ezekiel, but Sölle and Steffensky see the connection when they examine similar contemporary actions – such as pouring 'blood' over the country's president's table to symbolise the country's participation in injustice and violence – as 'practical jokes'.[40] As Walter Wink points out, there are various instances of humour undermining and sabotaging the well-thought-through and seemingly overpowering shackles of oppression and despair.[41] My favourite story comes from Poland during Solidarity's struggle in the 1980s: 'One group dressed in Santa Claus outfits distributed scarce sanitary napkins to women as a way of dramatizing the difficulty of obtaining essentials. When these Santas were arrested, other Santas showed up at the jail insisting that the others were frauds, that they were the *real* Santas.'[42] The oppressive powers often do not know how to handle humour – they are at a loss, at least initially. This is a weapon befitting the children of peace.

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[33] Kuschel, *Laughter*, p. 55.

[34] Arbuckle, *Laughing with God*, p. 13.

[35] Ibid., p. 15.

[36] For a background of this, see, e.g., John Saward, *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ's Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), chapters 5 and 6.

[37] On this, see a helpful commentary in Patrick Laude, *Divine Play, Sacred Laughter, and Spiritual Understanding* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), pp. 154ff.

[38] Dorothee Sölle and Fulbert Steffensky, 'Joy in Sects and Fringe Groups', in Metz and Jossua (eds.), *Concilium*, pp. 113-125. Sölle and Steffensky observe that the Bible is read differently in such groups in comparison to the established and recognised ecclesial bodies: there is a sense of immediacy and taking the primary sense of the passages, which are understood to be followed to the best of the Christian's abilities (pp. 122-124).

[39] As an example of taking seriously the idea of following the subversive 'foolishness of Jesus' from a contemporary Baptist perspective, see Michael Frost, *Jesus the Fool: The Mission of the Unconventional Christ* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010).

[40] Sölle and Steffensky, 'Joy in Sects and Fringe Groups', p. 121.

What kind of virtue would be vital for such prophetic practice of humour? I would like to suggest courage. Critiquing injustice by the means of humour is no light thing; in fact, it can be extremely dangerous, even if it may take a long time for the oppressive powers to understand that they are being mocked or exposed. There may be a great price to pay, as those involved in any kind of serious critique of the powers which control great flow of money and influence know. But then this is what we have been warned about at the very start of our response to follow Christ: 'If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also'.[43]

One further comment seems appropriate in relation to the virtue of courage. I would suggest that such exercise of critiquing through humour must first of all start with ourselves. For some of us this may come relatively easy, but for others – those who tend to be rather concerned for their dignity and public standing – such use of humour may require quite a bit of courage. Yet an ability to laugh at oneself and therefore critique oneself is a great help in our Christian character formation. It helps us to acknowledge and confess the angles which need to be worked on – our pride, our attempt to impress others, our fears… It helps us to begin to confess some less-than-pleasant truths about ourselves. Only when we are ready for that, are we also ready for the prophetic critique of the world. It will also help us to connect with others, and to help them realise that they are not alone in their struggle with similar issues. Here humour is not a barrier, but a bridge.

This is especially important so that our communities do not succumb to the temptation to present themselves as elite groupings – the gathering of the saints which are, in effect, inaccessible to anybody less than perfect. Surely we are called to holiness, but presenting ourselves as nothing but holy leads only to hypocrisy and eventually, crisis and scandal of the fall. For this reason, jokes about our Christian experience are an important indication. Healthy is a denomination which creates and enjoys jokes about itself. To demonstrate that, as a Baptist, I ought to conclude with one example – this is one of my favourites:[44]

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[41] Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 190-191.

[42] Ibid., p. 191; emphasis author's. I have not been able to verify the facts of this story, but even if it is partly fictional, it ought to happen, somewhere, someday.

[43] John 15:20b.

The Apostle Paul comes to visit the earth. Naturally, there is a big commotion; church leaders as well as the media gather at the place he chose as his base. The first one to go for an audience is the Pope. After a long time, the door opens, the Pope comes out, and to the journalists asking about the conversation, he responds: 'Well, we had a long talk. Paul explained to me some of his writings, and I had to admit that as Catholics, perhaps we have gone overboard with our worship of the Virgin Mary'.

Next comes a Pentecostal leader. After a long time, the door opens, the Pentecostal comes out, and when a journalist asks him about the audience, he says: 'Well, Paul explained to me what he meant when he wrote about the gifts of the Spirit, and I had to admit that perhaps we Pentecostals have overemphasised the importance of speaking in tongues'.

The next one to go is… yes, you guessed it, a Baptist leader. After a very, very long time, the door opens, and out comes the Apostle Paul. When the astonished journalists ask him about what happened, Paul responds: 'Well, I kept telling him, I, Paul, wrote this, and he kept saying, 'read as it is written'!'

In Conclusion

At the beginning of this article, I commented on the fact that humour in the life of the church is often received with ambivalence, if not suspicion and condemnation. One can sometimes despair at how weighted-down the churches have become, how in their seriousness they have lost the appropriate lightness. The same, Greely observes, is true of theologians and scholars, who 'will begin to laugh at themselves only fifteen minutes after the Parousia'.[45] I hope this does not have to be the case with *all* theologians.

However, the paradox of reflecting on the practice of humour is that it turns out to be a very serious matter, even when we are laughing our heads off. It can heal, but it surely can hurt: it can make or break such things as openness, friendships, or communities. It can help us erect barriers, both good and bad; and it can help us to celebrate life as well as find consolation in the midst of difficulties. Even more, it can help us to address some of those difficulties by critiquing them and pressing for a change. This is a good reason why theological reflections on humour are needed, and why it is not enough to simply tell jokes to each other and leave it at that.

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[44] Most jokes do not have one author, but are part of our communal heritage. I have not been able to trace the origins of the joke I share here, but I first heard it from another Baptist, and have used it many times in my lectures to Baptist students.

[45] Greely, 'Humour and Ecclesiastical Ministry,' p. 140.

‘Humour is the sign of the presence of God in [hu]mankind. But not of any old God and not of any old presence.’[46] This is why the practice begs for a thoughtful examination. As all elements of primary theology,[47] it can point to the *real*, lived-out content of our faith, and the real object of our devotion and loyalty. This is true both of things we laugh at and things we do not find funny. But if we keep on loving – ourselves, the church and the world for which the Son of God died – and if we keep on hoping, for the Spirit to work in the darkest of situations as well as in the celebratory moments of life – we will find inspiration for a courageous practice of humour.

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[46] Bessière, ‘Humour—A Theological Attitude?’ p. 90.

[47] Primary theology is a companion of the academic task of second-order theology—that is, ‘theology about theology’. (I am quoting here McClendon’s description of second-order theology. Interview by Ched Myers in *The Witness* (‘Embodying the “Great Story”: An Interview with James W. McClendon’). http://thewitness.org/archive/dec2000/mcclendon.html (accessed 3 August 2005). The first-order, or primary theology, concerns theological practice within the believing communities in their primary expressions: songs, prayers, testimonies, verbal and non-verbal expressions of reactions to particular events or circumstances, and to some degree, sermons and other occasions of teaching and admonishing. The second-order, or secondary, theology then is concerned with making sense, analysis and appraisal of the first-order material and the convictions expressed therein. Both types of discourses have been present with the churches, both are needed, and neither has a clear priority over the other.

Nurturing conformity or dissent.
What is the function of Christian formation?

Simon Oxley

1 Introduction

One Sunday I was a visiting preaching at a Methodist church. In welcoming me, the congregation was informed about my work and the fact I was a Baptist minister. After the service, a woman came up to me, saying, ‘I used to be a Baptist’. In the course of conversation I learnt that she had been a deacon but had been asked to leave the church by the minister. Apparently, she asked too many questions that might disturb new believers. My unworthy reaction was that it was probably the minister who couldn’t cope with questions. It is possible that the woman was a born trouble-maker but I gave her the benefit of the doubt. This encounter has stuck in my memory because it seems to me to be symptomatic of a problem we have in the church. We don’t like dissent, even if our tradition only exists because people dissented in the past.

In this article, I do not see dissent as complaining, fault-finding and general discontent. Dissent, in my view, comes out of commitment and conviction. It questions out of love, with a desire for improvement rather than destruction. I want to argue that, more than tolerating dissent, we need to nurture it for the sake of healthy community within the church and in society.

Whatever we say in our theologies and ecclesiologies, the church in all its manifestations is also a human institution. Institutions have a tendency to be concerned about their good functioning within the status quo and for their own preservation. We shouldn’t be surprised that when they engage in education or training, they do so with the aim of producing the kind of people who will fit the needs and ethos of the institution. In the history of the United Kingdom, and probably other countries, we can see how the slow progress from education being only for the powerful to education for all was resisted by those who feared that it might encourage the masses to think for themselves. Any education that was offered them ought to do no more than inculcate a conformity necessary for the preservation of a particular shape of society.

It is interesting to note that in two very different approaches to faith development theory, both James Fowler and John Westerhoff[1] postulate a stage or style of faith beyond which people may not move. The names, let alone the detailed descriptions, given to Fowler’s Conventional Faith stage and Westerhoff’s Affiliative Faith style indicate a level of conformity beyond which people may need some encouragement to develop. There is much more that can be said about all of this. However, if people's faith development is to be stuck at any point, it is remarkably convenient for an institutional church which wants to promote conformity and fears the questioning that is a feature of later stages or styles of faith.

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[1] J. Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper, 1981) and J. Westerhoff, *Will our children have faith* (New York: Seabury, 2002).

We know that human institutions, including churches, have been changed by dissenting voices. As Baptists we can bear witness to that. However, we can see that, once dissident voices have achieved power, they may sometimes revert to similar ills against which they had raised their voices. We can turn to fiction to illustrate this. In George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, the pigs were among the prime movers for the overthrow of the brutal farmer. At first all was well for all the animals under the new enlightened regime. It ends up, though, with the pigs living in the farmhouse and the rest of the animals suffering under a different oppressive regime. The book finishes with the animals looking through the farmhouse window at a gathering of the pigs and the humans with whom they were now trading – 'The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which.'[2] In the church, dissenters soon become conformists if we are not constantly alert to the gospel's constant call for transformation and renewal.

Although pentecostals, evangelicals, catholics, orthodox and so on may have different understandings of the sources of authority, they may display the same authoritarian institutional pressure for education and formation that is conformist. As Christians, we often appear to have an unhealthy self-obsession with the institutional form and expression of the church that wants to preserve and protect the status quo.

2 Formation – limiting or liberating?

An exploration of the possible meanings of formation is important because some understandings of the word deny any other possibility than a process leading to conformity. For example, the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines formation as being about giving 'form or shape to; fashion, mould …fashion into a certain shape'[3] and 'Mould (a person, the mind, a faculty, etc) by discipline, experience or education'.[4]

The idea of formation as an intentional process with a pre-determined outcome is reinforced in the Bible. The image of the human person being formed like a potter shapes clay, with the implication that God is the potter, is used in several places. In particular, all three parts of the book of Isaiah speak about this.[5] Jeremiah uses the image of the potter and the clay as an image of communal or national formation[6] and

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[2] G. Orwell, *Animal Farm* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), p120.
[3] *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
[4] Ibid.
[5] Isaiah 29.16, 45.9, 65.8.
[6] Jeremiah 18.1-6 NRSV.

Paul picks up the thought in Romans.[7] Even if the potter allows the pot to emerge in the creative process, ie. does not have an exact specification in mind when starting, the end product is always under the control of the potter. This has led some Christians to take a very deterministic view of formation. In terms of the use of the image for individuals or peoples, there is no possibility of them being other than passive objects of the formation process. If we use the image of potter in this way to control our concept of formation, we close the door on anything else other than a process which works towards a pre-determined end result.

Our interpretation of formation depends on what we consider the end product to be. Is Christian formation to be closed-ended or open-ended? If it is closed-ended, we end up with Christians who are formed in the image of the church as it is. If it is open-ended, we form Christian values, attitudes and, most importantly, relationships which can become the church as it is called to be in changing contexts. It allows for the possibility of people being co-creators with God and carrying responsibility for being agents of their own formation. Should 'being conformed to the image'[8] of Christ be limiting or liberating?

In recent years, some professions have been using formation to describe the process by which one becomes and is further developed as, for example, a doctor, engineer or teacher. Professional formation is usually seen to relate to learning a body of specialist knowledge and a skill set. This is done by formal educational processes and by practice in context. There has also been a lot of talk about formation in and around the churches – faith formation, lay formation, ministerial formation, spiritual formation, theological formation. We will take a look at some examples of the discussion around formation that has taken place in the churches and see what we can learn from them.

Laity and Faith/Christian formation

There is a significant overlap between laity formation and faith or Christian formation. In general terms, the focus in laity formation would be on adults whereas that in faith or Christian formation would be on all ages but often with a particular emphasis on children and young people.

In the 1960s there was much interest across the churches in laity formation. Denominations, individually and ecumenically, set up lay formation programmes and lay education centres. There was a recognition that the churches had placed most of their educational energy and resources into training ministers and clergy to the detriment of the whole people of God. One of the issues under discussion was whether lay people were just to be trained to do the existing work of the church or to be formed as active Christian disciples. A typical statement of the time was:

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[7] Romans 9.9 NRSV.

[8] Romans 8.29 NRSV.

> Training and equipment carry the implication that there are in the Church those who train or equip and others who need to be trained or equipped. This implication suggests itself all the more as it corresponds to much of the subconsciously held traditions to which we are subject in most of our churches. … Everybody forms and everybody is to be formed.[9]

There are echoes here of the thinking of Paulo Freire. Laity formation was seen to be relational and takes place in daily life and not just in the shelter of the church.

A representative expression of what is said by many churches on faith formation for children is this from the United Church of Canada which describes faith formation as:

> … holistic. It takes into account the whole person - thinking, feeling, loving, hurting, imaginative, and creative. God is encountered in the church, the cultural community, and the created world from which participants come. Experience of the heart - mystery, wonder and awe - are as important as rational expressions through doctrine, dogma, and creeds in forming faith. Faith formation in the church happens, not just through the practice of spiritual disciplines, important as these continue to be, but through full participation in the life, ministry, and mission of the church as it engages with its cultural community.[10]

Using a different kind of language, the Cooperative Baptists of the USA talk of spiritual formation:

> we encourage the on-going development of the core of who we are as individual believers. Spiritual Formation is the process of being shaped in the image of Christ by the gracious working of God's Spirit, for the transformation of the world.[11]

Faith development theorists[12] recognise the significance of participation in the life of the faith community. Within that, the experience of worship is particularly powerful. In an examination of the relationship between ecclesiology and ethics, Duncan Forrester argues that, 'Christian worship is essentially transformative. The worship of an expectant church is liberating'.[13] However, he goes on to recognise that worship can also perpetuate or legitimate injustice inside and outside the church.

Without our noticing what is happening, participating in worship and the life of the church forms attitudes, behavioural patterns and relationships, gives us a vocabulary and a set of concepts – for better or for worse. Formation does not have to be intentional for it to be effective.

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[9] *Laity Formation: Proceedings of the Ecumenical Consultation, Gazzada, Italy, September 7-10 1965* (Rome: Permanent Committee for International Congresses of the Lay Apostolate, 1966), pp.16-18.

[10] *Seeds and Sowers Children, Vol19, Fall 2000* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2000), p. 4.

[11] www.thefellowship.info/CL/FF/

[12] eg James Fowler and John Westerhoff.

[13] D.B. Forrester, 'Ecclesiology and Ethics: A Reformed Perspective' in T.F. Best and M. Robra (eds), *Costly Commitment: Ecclesiology and Ethics* (Geneva: WCC Faith and Order and Unit III, 1995), p. 23.

Theological formation

In 1989, *Ministerial Formation* articulated an understanding of formation as distinct from education or training. Theological education can be understood as a formal academic process by which knowledge, traditions and practices are handed down from one generation to another. Ministerial formation is more than that as:

> it is also about formation, ie. the moulding by discipline, instruction and organisation of persons and institutions, so that they may be true embodiments and servants of what ministry is all about. In other words, in formation we are as much concerned about sound theology as about life-style which testifies to the truth of what is claimed. And here we must admit that theology, the God-talk, in its captivity to the scientific method has lost something of its holistic nature of being both knowledge and praxis.[14]

The change from ministerial training to ministerial formation ought to represent a significant change in understanding and practice.

From the late nineteenth century the residential, monastic-like seminary or theological college was the norm for most denominations in Britain and elsewhere. The mix of academic study, worship and community life was believed to form future clergy as priests and pastors. As we have noted, any participation in community can be a powerfully formative experience. In the late twentieth century, questions emerged to challenge the residential seminary model - not about the principle of formation in community but what kind of community(ies) should be the location of formation. The church should be a learning community so the congregation should be the basic locus of formation for faith, discipleship and ministries. Theological study, whether at an educational institution or through a course delivered in other ways, should not be a parallel activity but integrated with contextual learning and practice.

In 2003, the Church of England published the (Hind) report *Formation for ministry within a learning church.*[15] It offers a definition:

> Formation is … dynamic in that it is a creative process initiated and sustained by God, to which the candidate, and later, the minister is invited to respond. It is continuing, in that it cannot be confined to the period of formal training … Formation takes place in a range of settings, and not just in intentional communities of training institutions.[16]

These settings include everyday life, the church, formal educational activity and the practice of ministry. The process of formation is seen by the Hind report as lifelong and as integrative:

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[14] Programme on Theological Education, *Ministerial Formation No 45, April 1989* (Geneva: Programme for Theological Education), p. 3.

[15] Church of England Archbishop's Council, *Formation for Ministry within a Learning Church* (London, Church House Publishing, 2003).

[16] Ibid., p. 39.

> … it encourages the concept of lifelong growth and learning. …This seems to be required by our belief in the living God who is constantly drawing us deeper into the mystery of Christ. It is also required by the exigencies of a rapidly changing world. … It is important not to see formation merely as a process of moulding. … Rather formation should be seen as the overarching concept that integrates the person, understanding and competence.[17]

Much of the above can been seen to be relevant to the formation of all Christian disciples and not just those who are called to ordained ministry. For those of us who stand in the Baptist tradition, we should not have to be reminded of the significance of the learning community in relation to formation. We should also be asking ourselves why we devote so much attention and resources to forming ministers in comparison to forming disciples whose communal responsibility is to discern and act on the mind of Christ for our times and contexts. We will return to this discussion later.

3 The necessity of dissent

'Sweetly may we all agree', a line from Charles Wesley's hymn *Christ from whom all blessings flow,* expresses a common feeling about how things ought to be in the church. People become anxious when there is disagreement within local congregations. Those traditions which emphasise the meeting of church members as the place where the mind of Christ is discerned often appear to encourage a quasi-mystical view of how this is achieved. Diversity of opinion and dissent appear, in this context, to be counter-cultural terms.

We must not confuse 'sweet agreement' with being in relationship – in and with Christ and with one another. Agreement is related to this but not necessary for it. Everyday experience demonstrates that a high quality of relationship between people does not depend on agreement and that the fact that people agree on things does not necessarily imply any quality of relationship.

I want to demonstrate that dissent is of positive benefit and that, in consequence, it is a responsibility of Christian formation to nurture it. There is a wealth of intelligent and academic writing around the necessity for dissent in any healthy society. Much of this has been produced in recent years, perhaps triggered by polarisation and intolerance in politics which make it impossible to have discussion. What has such analysis and reflection to say to the Christian community?

Cass Sunstein in *Why Societies Need Dissent*,[18] developed from the Oliver Wendell Holmes Lectures at Harvard Law School 2003, demonstrates why demands for narrow conformity in many areas of life are wrong. This study brings together empirical evidence for the significance of opposition and of the benefits of disagreement. He draws on a wealth of experimental studies on group dynamics and decision-making, to draw attention to two understandable but unhelpful human traits. First, it is usually easier and, indeed, can make good sense to form our opinions on the basis of those of other people rather than to work from primary data and principles. Second, the value of our relationships within groups and society is such that we want others to have a good opinion of us. The effect of these can be to disable dissent. For some, that might be no bad thing. However, as Sunstein points out, dissent offers different perspectives and information to a group. When decisions are made on the basis of incomplete information, there is a higher probability of their being incorrect.

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[17] Ibid., p. 29.

[18] Cass R. Sunstein, *Why Societies Need Dissent* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003).

Sunstein does not suggest that all conflict is healthy. Interpersonal conflict does not improve outcomes, whereas substantive conflict does. He argues that, in group process:

> Diversity of information is the most important variable … conflicts about substance are most likely to be helpful … If people are fighting because of personal animus, they are less likely to accomplish their tasks.[19]

For churches in traditions where it is the responsibility of the believing community to determine the mind of Christ, the distinction between interpersonal conflict and substantive conflict is an important one to recognise. The first has the potential to split the community apart; the latter has the potential to enable the community to hear the new and consider different possibilities before arriving at consensus.

The dissenter should not be confused with the contrarian. The contrarian disagrees simply for the sake of doing so or because there is some perceived benefit in doing so. The dissenter disagrees in the belief that they hold a valid alternative view. Sunstein suggests that conformists can be criticised as profiting from others without contributing:

> … conformists are free-riders, benefiting from the actions of others without adding anything of their own. … By contrast, dissenters often confer benefits on others, offering information and ideas from which the community gains a great deal. … the problem is that dissenters often have little incentive to speak out, simply because they would gain nothing from dissenting. … Successful groups and organisations need to find ways to reward them.[20]

It can be argued that homogenous groups find it difficult to keep on learning because their members bring less and less of what is new to any discussion. They may be able to continue to do what they already do but are increasingly unable to adapt or innovate. Some within the Christian community may feel that the church is essentially unchanging so that is no problem. However, for those who believe that they must be attentive to God’s call to be church in this place and at this time, finding contextual ways of following in the way of Jesus is vital.

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[19] Ibid., p. 136.

[20] Ibid., p. 12.

Homogeneous groups encourage conformity. Sunstein describes this as a form of self-censorship. It may be easier for an individual member to change their stated opinion than to challenge the group. There needs to be a positive culture of free expression that mitigates the tendency to conform. It is not only the protection of a right to free speech but the deliberate building-in of opportunities for dissent – ‘Well-functioning societies take steps to discourage conformity and to promote dissent’.[21]

Sunstein reports that analysis of research indicates that information tending to promote consensus in a group is more highly valued than that which promotes debate: ‘groups tend to dwell on shared information and neglect information that is held by a few members’.[22] He also identifies the problems of a phenomenon called a social cascade. This occurs when people follow the lead of opinion-setters and then others follow the followers. Decisions are taken not on what they actually know but on what they believe someone else knows. He notes that the power of such a cascade is such that ‘followers’ who have information which would serve to question or discredit keep it to themselves. Intelligent imitation can be useful because it helps good ideas to spread quickly. However, slavish imitation is dangerous. The existence of this phenomenon reinforces the need for independent thinking.

A third tendency is that of social polarisation. This occurs when people come under the joint influence of their common group membership and beliefs. Against expectations which might point to a mutual moderation of opinion, there is the possibility of collective decisions being more extreme than the position of any individual member. ‘Like-minded people, after discussions with their peers, tend to end up thinking a more extreme version of what they thought before they started to talk’.[23] Groups can move their members opinions towards extremes without them being aware of what is happening. A detailed explanation of how this works is beyond the limits of this article but is fully explored by Sunstein.

The effects of social polarisation might make one inclined to deny any value to groups in developing thought or policy or in taking decisions. While there is strong evidence for the existence of polarisation, not all groups become polarised. The evidence is strong that groups which are not polarised consistently make better decisions and come up with better answers than most of their members. Many groups are able to be wiser than any single member or even the sum of individuals. Collective deliberation and decision-making have greater possibilities than reliance on individual leaders or experts. In the churches, I suggest, there has been a consistent failure to engage people in their diversity other than as recipients of the wisdom of the few. Within our Baptist tradition we need to recognise how the glorious freedom and responsibility of the covenanted community of believers may be confined by social processes.

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[21] Ibid., p. 213.
[22] Ibid., pp.18f.
[23] Ibid., p. 112.

Churches can be prey to the three phenomena described by Sunstein – conformity, social cascading and social polarisation. Each Christian tradition represents a received wisdom and a handed-down culture that is particular to us. Much of that may relate to basic principles. However, at least some is that which once was appropriately contextual for situations and times now past but has now become not just normative but authoritative.

In order to meet our human need to be accepted, liked and respected, we may conform to the behaviour and thought patterns of the church. This may mean that individuals do not speak out about organisational or individual behaviour that they believe to be unacceptable. We have seen this, for example, in churches in relation to racism. Also those suffering from or who have observed child abuse have not been able to speak out – not only because of pressures from church authorities but also from church members. This may allow injustice to be unchecked and deprive the church of different perspectives which would enrich their deliberations and transform their behaviour. Dissent is vital for a healthy Christian community.

The key concept for healthy groups, organisations and societies emerging from Sunstein’s book is dissent. Even having a diversity of people – gender, social class, ethnicity etc – in a congregation is no guarantee of a diversity of outlook by reason of tendencies such as social cascading and group polarisation. Sunstein emphasises:

> … the importance of ensuring that people are exposed to a range of positions and do not self-select into narrow communities of their own devising.[24]

Our problem is that all too often the church has allowed itself to become a collection of such narrow communities.

Sunstein’s ‘dissent’ is related to independent thinking and what has been described as critical thinking. Here, the task of Christian formation is almost internally self-contradictory – to develop relationship and independence. Relationship has the potential to undermine or destroy independence of thought. We cannot avoid the reality that we are shaped in our ways of thinking and our whole being by our communal context. The methodological task is to access and develop different ways of learning. It is not that these do not already exist but either that they are practised in unregarded and unvalued forms of education or that they have been co-opted and distorted into serving the dominant educational ends.

Christian formation has to help people understand that dissent or independence of thinking is not of necessity a threat to relationship but a positive gift to the health and development of the life and mission of the church. To take Sunstein’s conclusion:

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[24] Ibid., p. 211.

> The general lesson is clear. Organizations and nations are far more likely to prosper if they welcome dissent and promote openness. Well-functioning societies benefit from a wide range of views; their citizens do not live in gated-communities or echo chambers.[25]

This is more than tolerating differences or even accepting differences. Communities centred on Jesus by their nature ought to be alive with fresh, counter-cultural thinking which can be tested by their members. Unfortunately, churches and related bodies do not have a good record in valuing dissent. One can understand why any human institution desires to keep control of its members, particularly in their understanding of the truth it espouses. This often appears to be more about power than truth even though it is expressed in God language. The effect is to demonise dissenters as being anti-God as well as anti-institution, which is very useful for the institution. In promoting independent or critical thinking, we will be serving the health of the churches.

Independence of thinking has to be developed within the context of relationships otherwise it will be private knowledge which benefits no one but the holder. The value of dissent is when it is expressed within the community and not outside it. The task of Christian formation is not to produce dissidents who stand outside the community and throw stones or contrarians who amuse or annoy because of their outrageous posturing. What is needed are people who think differently and belong, who are committed to the community of believers but not trapped in its ways of thinking and acting.

The nurturing of dissent is not only vital for the internal quality of life of the church. It is also vital for that for which the church exists – God’s work in the world. As human institutions, churches want to be respectable and acceptable in the societies in which they live and have their being – to be a benign presence and no threat to the powers that be. However, for those societies to be healthy, for the reasons I have discussed, they need dissenting voices.

Recently I had to lead a seminar on ‘Baptists in the Twentieth Century’ for some students preparing for ministry in the Baptist Union of Great Britain. In my preparatory reading I was struck by the way Baptists, Congregationalists etc. become anxious to be known as the Free Churches rather than dissenters or non-conformists out of a desire for respectability and acceptability. As I reflect on my own experience of being taught early Baptist history many decades ago, the relationship of the emerging British Baptist movement to continental Anabaptists was downplayed, if not denied – presumably for fear of being tainted by association with such a dangerous tradition. Perhaps we are more comfortable with the kingdom of God being conformed to the kingdoms of the world as it makes us acceptable to society than we are to face the challenge of conforming the kingdoms of the world to the kingdom of God.

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[25] Ibid., pp. 210f.

In the UK, like many countries, we have experienced severe cutbacks on government spending which have impacted the poorest members of society. Churches, even those without a history of social activism, and other groups have responded by setting up food banks motivated by compassion. As vital as this is, there is a danger that it may simply be putting a sticking plaster on a wound that needs serious treatment. Church members are encouraged to sign online petitions concerning the issue but there needs to be more reflection in our churches on the biblical and theological grounding of dissent.

As Christians, individually and collectively, we need formation that nurtures dissent so we may challenge society in the justice of God as well as hold the hands of victims with the loving care of God. If we are too worried about conforming and being acceptable in society, this will not happen. There is a quotation attributed to Dom Helda Camara, ‘When I feed the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist’. Churches which speak and act in ways that are ‘turning the world upside down’[26] can provide the kind of dissent that make societies more healthy.

However, we must be careful. Dissent in society should be about promoting the values of the gospel and the kingdom. It is not about protecting the interests, property and power of the church and Christian individuals.

4 What kind of Christian community?

Christian formation is as much a function of our participation in Christian community as it is participating in formal learning activities. The nature of that community will tend either to nurture conformity or dissent. Stuart and Sian Murray Williams have popularised a notion of being multi-voiced which, they claim, has been a recurring feature of renewal movements where ‘Men and women, young and old, educated and illiterate, rich and poor find their voices and discover their vocations’.[27]

They argue that there is a dominant tradition across the churches, including those whose tradition might make them do otherwise, of being mono-voiced. Those involved in the life of Christian communities become ‘passive consumers instead of active participants.’[28] The activity and theological reflection are controlled by particular individuals or by small groups. Church meetings become occasions for approving the plans of leaders rather than discerning the mind of Christ. Instead, there should be an expectation that ‘the whole community is gifted, called, empowered and expected to be involved in all aspects of church life’.[29] They are at pains to point out that being multi-voiced does not imply that anyone can do anything but that we are all gifted in some way.

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[26] Acts 17.6 NRSV.

[27] S. and S. Murray Williams, *Multi-voiced Church* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2012), p. 3.

[28] Ibid., p. 6.

[29] Ibid., p. 6.

Mono-voiced churches reinforce a consumerist mentality where people sit passively and respond as required. This develops dependency on leaders rather than maturity in faith. It hinders the development of mutuality in support, encouragement and accountability which they argue becomes more important when we are called to live counter-culturally. For those of us who understand the purpose of each covenanted community of believers to be the discernment and practice of the mind of Christ, multi-voiced church has particular significance:

> In relation to discernment it means believing that the community can seek the mind of Christ together, confident in the direction of the Spirit and hopeful of reaching a united decision. It means drawing out the reticent, including the marginalized, listening for the prophetic minority, developing processes to ensure all are heard and that decisions are made without undue delay. This does not abolish vision-casting and decisive action, but it dramatically increases the community's ownership of what is decided.[30]

Any voice may be the one that opens up new insights and identifies new possibilities. In the terms of this article, this implies giving encouragement to dissenting voices and listening to them with the same attention as given to the established participants. Multi-voiced church is not a recipe for anarchy because it is not about everyone saying what they want, when they want. It presumes that people learn to listen as well as to speak, to discern as well as to propose.

All this raises issues for our understanding and practice of leadership in Christian community. The Murray Williams suggest that 'leadership is needed more than ever but it operates in a rather different way'.[31] The styles of leadership we need to develop would have to be rather different from those that invest individual ministers or leadership teams with the sole authoritative voice. This brings us back to the incident I recounted at the start of the article. Can those who are called to exercise leadership not only tolerate the questions of dissenting voices but actively encourage them?

5 Conclusion

We cannot deny that there is a historically legitimated understanding of formation that has to do with the external imposition of processes which result in a clearly defined end product of people who believe certain things and behave in particular ways. Churches can be seen to have an interest in such a process that moulds people who fit comfortably in their ecclesiology, theology and ethos. As we have noted, this is a temptation for all institutions.

What might be the qualities of a formation that is not predetermined but works according to the principles and hope offered us in Christ related to our context – a formation that encourages commitment and conviction whilst supporting rather than discouraging dissent and that enables practices of listening and discernment. I offer some assertions which seem to me to be worthy of consideration:

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[30] Ibid., p. 7.
[31] Ibid., p. 6.

1. Formation is not only about individuals but community. Individuals are formed by participating in community, whether they recognise it or not, whether they desire it or not. The set of relationships that comprise Christian community shapes its participants. Congregations tend to get hung up on programmes or particular activities when they think about Christian formation. They are observable and measurable whereas participation in the whole life of community seems to be insubstantial and trivial in comparison. Whether a community is to be positive in forming or deforming, according to our judgement, will depend on the quality and authenticity of the life of the community. Relationships, power, words and practices must be coherent. Stuart and Sian Murray Williams suggest that the community needs to be multi-voiced rather than mono-voiced. Community is also constantly being formed and reformed. In order for Christian community to be healthy and not trapped in a tight circle of its own thinking, the voice of dissent is needed for constant renewal. Formation of individuals should not take place in isolation from community and will have an effect on community.
2. Formation is not simply about the transmission of given theological concepts and ecclesial practices. It is more about the transformation that shapes knowledge for the context and the hour in which we live. Baptist communities need to reaffirm that it is the constant task of the covenant community to discern the mind of Christ. The gospel is about incarnate love in each place and time. So, it is not simply about transmission but also about transformation.
3. Formation is a life-long ongoing process. It is not just for children and young people or new believers. The ageing process, for individuals and communities, should not result in us becoming more reactionary and set in our ways.
4. Formation is about always being open to new experiences. Knowing how to reflect on these opens up possibilities for learning and development. Formation implies listening to others, not only through what is said but what happens around us.
5. Discernment and critical/independent thinking are important aspects of Christian formation for everyone as they are the means by which we are able to assess and integrate what we receive and experience. The vocation of all Christians is to do theology. Otherwise we live our lives by the same common sense and instinct as everyone else. In that case, our dissenting voice lacks the commitment and conviction that make it an instrument of God’s love and the kingdom.

To be conformed to Christ, individuals and churches alike need to nurture dissenting voices.

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Towards a Baptist Framework for Spiritual Direction

Tim Mountain

1. Introduction

In 2011, an ecumenical team of Inspectors assessed the quality of theological education and ministerial formation at Spurgeon's College, London. In their subsequent report,[1] the authors suggested spiritual direction is one of a number of disciplines that would help sustain ministry. They noted that although 'the nature of spiritual direction is explained at various points in the course, this is not well known, nor well-used, within the Baptist tradition'[2] and recommended that 'the College is more intentional in alerting and enabling students to seek spiritual direction within an appropriate Baptist framework'.[3]

This begs a number of questions. Is there any hard data concerning the practice of spiritual direction by Baptists? Why has its nature and practice not been 'well-known, nor well-used within the Baptist tradition' until relatively recently? Why is it on the increase? What might an appropriate Baptist framework for spiritual direction be? In this paper I want to report on some research that begins to consider these questions, particularly focussing on Baptist ministers.[4]

Angela Reed makes the observation that 'in renewal movements, practice often precedes careful reflection on theological foundations'.[5] It appears to me that this is what has happened with regard to spiritual direction. Although I would not describe it as a movement, there is nonetheless a significant renewal of interest in this ministry, and we might ask whether Baptist ministers who self-designate as spiritual directors have thought sufficiently on how their practice relates to and expresses their theological convictions. Thus, the general aim of the research was to reflect critically on spiritual direction as offered by accredited Baptist ministers in order to suggest how it might be practised in ways that are faithful to Baptist convictions about God and the church.

Very little is published on spiritual direction by Baptists in Britain. As might be expected, the Baptist Union Retreat Group (BURG) has produced a couple of leaflets; in hers, Susan Stevenson notes that there has ‘been a recovery in the role of the Pastor as, effectively, Spiritual Director’.[6] John Rackley, writing for the Catholic journal, *The Way*, gives a Baptist perspective on ‘spiritual guidance’,[7] a term that could be regarded as broader than, but includes, spiritual direction. In an article on spirituality for the Baptist *Mainstream* magazine, Ian Randall included spiritual direction as one of three areas he considers ‘important for contemporary discipleship in the current renewal of interest in spirituality and spiritual formation’ and observes that ‘more and more Baptist ministers are seeking spiritual directors’.[8] Recently, the matter of spiritual direction is being raised and discussed informally via internet blogs.[9] With little theological reflection concerning the practice among Baptists in the United Kingdom, it seems appropriate to give some attention to it.

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[1] John Briggs and others, *Inspection Report: Spurgeon's College* (London: Ministry Division of the Archbishops' Council, 2011), http://www.baptist.org.uk/prayer-download/ doc_view/859-spurgeons-college-inspection-report.html, accessed 13 March 2013.

[2] Ibid., para. 41, p. 17.

[3] Ibid., Recommendation 4, p. 17. I do not recall anything being taught concerning spiritual direction when I was a student at Spurgeon's College (during 1989-1993).

[4] Timothy J. Mountain, 'Spiritual Direction: Contemporary Practice among Baptist Ministers of the Baptist Union of Great Britain' (unpublished Master's dissertation, University of Wales, Spurgeon's College, 2013). Given the constraints of time and space the focus was specifically on Baptist ministers of the Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB) who refer to themselves as spiritual directors.

[5] Angela H. Reed, *Quest for Spiritual Community: Reclaiming Spiritual Guidance for Contemporary Congregations* (London: T&T Clark International, 2011), p. 114.

2. Definition

But a prior and difficult question immediately faces us: what is meant by spiritual direction? Given the constraints of space, it is not possible here to rehearse the history of its genesis and development. Kenneth Leech, among others, has done this in detail.[10] Suffice to say, it has its roots in the solitary desert *abbas* and *ammas* of the fourth and fifth centuries who were sought out for their words of wisdom and counsel by Christians desiring to discern the leading and will of God for their lives. It took more formal shape in monastic communities, evolved through the years of the medieval church, and has been developed and practised by Catholic and Protestant wings of the Church over succeeding centuries. Inevitably, interpretations and definitions of spiritual direction that are commonly offered in contemporary literature reflect the complicated interplay of factors involved in that history, and it has taken varying shapes and forms in different traditions and eras. In order to comment on what is happening among Baptists today, the approach I have taken here is to draw from these contemporary interpretations to inform a description of spiritual direction that is then compared to empirical data from ministers who self-designate as spiritual directors. This is not to imply this is a universally normative interpretation of direction, but it is a place and a way to begin some Baptist reflection in this area. A thorough theological exploration and grounding of spiritual direction within the wider context of spiritual growth and transformation from a Baptist perspective might be a beneficial study in the future.[11]

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[6] Susan Stevenson, *Spiritual Direction in the Nonconformist Tradition,* Occasional Paper 15 (Didcot: Baptist Union Retreat Group, 1995), un-numbered p. 3, para. 5. See also, Will Thompson, *What is Spiritual Direction?,* Occasional Paper 4 (Didcot: Baptist Union Retreat Group, [n.d.]).

[7] John Rackley, ‘The Free Churches: A Baptist Perspective’, *The Way*, 36 (1996), pp. 69-76.

[8] Ian M. Randall, ‘A Deeper Spirituality’, *Talk: The Mainstream Magazine,* 3 (2004), pp. 18-19 (p. 19).

[9] For example, Stephen R. Holmes, ‘Spiritual Direction in the Non-Conformist Tradition’, http://shoredfragments.wordpress.com/2009/07/02/spiritual-direction-in-the-nonconformist-tradition, accessed 13 March 2013.

[10] Kenneth Leech, *Soul Friend: Spiritual Direction in the Modern World,* rev. edn (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2001), pp. 30-85.

[11] I am grateful to Philip Endean for his suggestion with regard to this.

I will use the term spiritual direction to mean: an intentional one-with-another relationship whereby one person (the director), by careful and prayerful listening over a period of time, helps another (the directee) to pay attention to and discern the actions of the Holy Spirit in his or her walk with God, so that the directee's relationship with God might grow and deepen in obedience and loving intimacy.[12] As noted above, there are ways of understanding spiritual direction to be other than this 'traditional' one-with-another director-directee relationship; in particular, we shall see below how such an understanding was significantly re-interpreted and re-shaped by Protestants (including Baptists) subsequent to the Reformation.

In what follows, I will give an overview of the research, very briefly summarising its methodology and noting some of the findings. I shall then focus on one aspect, namely justifying the practice of spiritual direction, before concluding with some thoughts on what a framework for spiritual direction among Baptists might look like.

3. Methodology and Analysis

The methodology was based on a pastoral cycle model.[13] Descriptions and experiences of the spiritual direction offered by Baptist ministers were gathered, followed by analysis and reflection, concluding with an attempt to map out a way ahead. Data were obtained principally from responses submitted by ministers who were surveyed by a self-administered questionnaire. It contained both quantitative questions (such as gender, age, location, numbers of directees) and qualitative questions (such as seeking ministers' views on what spiritual direction is, or what drew them to the ministry). Thirty-three accredited ministers (out of forty-four identified and invited to take part in the research) returned questionnaires.

Analysis of the questionnaires yielded interesting observations. The responses showed that the nature of the spiritual direction being offered corresponded to the definition being used; for example, the intentionality and purpose of meetings with directees or the vocabulary used to describe the subject matter of conversations (words such as 'prayerful', 'discernment' or 'attention') is characteristic of one-with-another spiritual direction. Most ministers offering direction concurrently serve in other roles, e.g. local pastorates, chaplaincy, regional or college positions. Others are 'retired', and three are listed as 'spiritual directors' in the BUGB Directory. Ministers described their understanding of the nature of spiritual direction, what motivated them to become involved in this ministry, their training and formation in direction, its relationship to mentoring and counselling, their practice in terms of style, frequency and the church affiliations of their directees. Comprehensive reflection on these observations and descriptions is not possible here, and I refer the interested reader to the dissertation itself. In the following pages I shall attempt to justify the practice of spiritual direction by Baptists, and conclude with a suggestion of what a Baptist framework might look like.

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[12] The cue for this definition is taken from those offered by William A. Barry and William J. Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 2nd edn (New York: HarperOne, 2009), p. 8, and Gene Barrette, 'Spiritual Direction in the Roman Catholic Tradition', *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 30 (2002), pp. 290-302 (p. 290).

[13] For example, as discussed by Laurie Green, *Let's Do Theology: Resources for Contextual Theology*, 2nd edn (London: Mowbray, 2009).

4. Justifying Spiritual Direction

(a) Misgivings

Until relatively recently Baptists have viewed spiritual direction cautiously, if not suspiciously. Standing in the Reformed stream, Marian Raikes speaks for a number of evangelicals, perhaps including some Baptists, in making this rather damning indictment:

> One thing which has surprised me, and which also concerns me, is the number of conversations I have had with professing evangelicals, in evangelical churches, about things which are definitely not traditional evangelical practices. Things like Ignatian retreats, or Celtic prayer, or pilgrimages to Iona or Taizé, or finding a 'spiritual director.' [14]

The criticism continues:

> For evangelicals to look in such directions for their spiritual sustenance is, at best, of limited value and, at worst, highly damaging. Either way, the result is unlikely to be what our people set out to find; such 'spiritualities' will never truly satisfy.[15]

To counter this drift away from what she perceives to be solid and trustworthy evangelical foundations, she urges better care by ministers of their members by having one-to-one 'spiritual conversations' that include talking directly about Jesus, which allow for the place of experience and emotion, talk through issues of satisfaction and contentment and teach, model and encourage the practice of biblical meditation.[16]

In response, it seems to me that this sounds rather similar to the purpose and practice of spiritual direction! Moreover, I consider her misgivings and criticisms to be ill-informed and unwarranted. In this section I want to argue that the ministry of spiritual direction and directors as defined in this paper has a place in Baptist life today. I will do this (1) by considering why spiritual direction has been neglected for many centuries by Baptists, and (2) by seeking to justify it through unpacking the term 'spiritual director'. By exploring what the latter might and might not mean, hopefully it will become apparent that misgivings about the term and the ministry that lies behind it are misplaced.

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[14] Marian Raikes, *Presenting Everyone Mature: Evangelicals and Spiritual Growth*, Biblical Theology for the 21st Century, 21 (Histon: Orthos, 2004), p. 4.

[15] Ibid., p. 22.

[16] Ibid., p. 22.

(b) Neglect

The reasons why spiritual direction has been long neglected by Baptists lie in the Reformers' reactions to what were perceived to be untrustworthy practices in the Church of their day.

After the Reformation, although Anglicanism in Britain continued to embrace the practice of spiritual direction as it had been practised for centuries, this was not the case for other Protestant traditions. Luder Whitlock, tracing the place of spiritual direction in the Reformed tradition, explains why.[17] The Reformers, he writes, did not deny the central goal of spiritual direction as had been practised for centuries in the Church and monastic orders, namely that believers should grow towards greater spiritual maturity and deepen their relationship with God. However, they objected to any means that placed too much authority in another person at the expense of Christ as the one Mediator (e.g. 1 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 9:15), to anything that supplanted scripture as the Word of God (e.g. 2 Timothy 3:16-17) or ignored the necessary work of the Spirit in regeneration and sanctification – after all, did not Jesus say that the Spirit would be our teacher and guide us into truth (e.g. John 14:25-26; 16:13)? Spiritual direction as practised by priests seemed to undermine these things and the Reformers reacted against it. Instead,

> [...] it was one's relationship to God through reading the Word and hearing it proclaimed that became paramount [...] accompanied by prayer and reliance on the Holy Spirit to provide the enlightening guidance that was needed by each Christian.[18]

So spiritual direction as a formal, director-directee relationship was viewed suspiciously, and fell into disuse in Protestant churches downstream of the Reformation, including those that became Baptist.

Nonetheless, as Leech notes, other forms of guidance continued within the Protestant stream, much of it through individuals who, although not called 'spiritual directors', were a strong influence in others' lives. For example, personal counsel was routinely given by Luther who developed a 'pattern of mutual cure [care] of souls by laymen'.[19] Calvin is referred to as a 'director of souls' by a recent commentator on Reformed spirituality (although he claims there are crucial differences from the Catholic model, e.g. the Protestant director does not claim as much authority).[20] Despite resistance to the role of a priest as Confessor, Zwingli advised the practice of confession to a 'wise scholar' where necessary: 'Auricular confession is nothing but a consultation in which we receive from him whom God has appointed ... advice as to how we can secure peace of mind.'[21] Much later, George Fox was referred to as a 'discerner of men's spirits', someone who through the Spirit was able to 'bring people off from their own ways to Christ'.[22]

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[17] Luder G. Whitlock, Jr, 'Spiritual Direction in the Reformed Tradition', *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 30 (2002), pp. 314-22.

[18] Ibid., p. 315.

[19] Leech, *Soul Friend*, p. 80.

[20] Ibid., p. 81.

Letters too were a significant means of guidance. As well as Calvin, Leech names Scottish Presbyterian, John Knox, and English Puritan, Thomas Cartwright, as examples of those who gave specific direction through their epistles. Treatises and books were written to give clear and firm guidance and direction to the readers.[23] In the eighteenth century Baptists too offered counsel and guidance through letters and a rich network of 'soul friendships' as revealed in the writings of Andrew Fuller.[24]

Mutual spiritual direction in groups was also a feature of historical Protestantism (and continues today).[25] Quaker groups and Methodist class meetings were characterised by reciprocity among their members in helping 'each other to work out their own salvation' or searching their hearts 'to the bottom'.[26] With regard to Baptists and other congregationally-governed churches, Stevenson notes the centrality of the Church Meeting, an occasion where guidance and direction are sought together.[27]

In summary, as a consequence of the Reformation, Baptists joined other Protestants in rejecting the one-with-another spiritual direction that was characteristic of the church they were protesting against. However, as we shall explore more fully below, they simply replaced one form of direction with another, also with its attendant dangers. Only recently has a more traditional model of spiritual direction been recovered and practised. Given its growing popularity, what response can be made to its critics such as Raikes? In what ways can its practice be justified for today's Baptists? To do this I want to reflect on the term 'spiritual director'.

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[21] Ibid., p. 80.

[22] Ibid., p. 82.

[23] Ibid., p. 81.

[24] See Andrew Fuller, *Memoirs of the late Rev. Samuel Pearce* (Clipstone: J.W. Morris, 1800), especially the collection of letters on pp. 211-25. For the revival in eighteenth-century Particular Baptist life in which Fuller and Pearce were important figures, see Peter J. Morden, *Offering Christ to the World: Andrew Fuller (1754-1815) and the Revival of Eighteenth-Century Particular Baptist Life*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought 8 (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003). I am grateful to Peter Morden for drawing my attention to these.

[25] For example, Jeanette A. Bakke, *Holy Invitations: Exploring Spiritual Direction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), pp. 139-48 and Sue Pickering, *Spiritual Direction: A Practical Introduction* (London: Canterbury Press, 2008), pp. 194-98, write about this.

[26] Leech, *Soul Friend*, p. 82. For a detailed discussion on Methodist spiritual direction, see Wesley D. Tracy, 'Spiritual Direction in the Wesleyan-Holiness Movement', *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 30 (2002), pp. 323-35.

[27] Stevenson, *Spiritual Direction*,un-numbered, p. 3, para. 9.

(c) Understanding the role of the spiritual director

What is meant by 'spiritual'?

Reasons for a recovery of spiritual direction are located within the broader realm of changing contemporary spirituality in the West. A problem with articles on spirituality is that they can become out-dated fairly quickly,[28] and from a British viewpoint, many books on spiritual direction are North American, which comment on aspects of the continent's spirituality that do not necessarily transfer across the Atlantic.

A thorough exploration of spirituality and its varied expressions is beyond the scope and remit of this paper. For our purposes here however, how can we connect spiritual direction with contemporary spirituality? One possibility is to use a definition of spirituality suggested by Paul Fiddes.[29] He observes that it is a 'slippery concept, difficult to define and to distinguish from a general concept of religion'.[30] But significantly, he suggests a way to understand the nature of spirituality is that it is a useful term to express the quality of giving attention to the 'other'.

This proposal is helpful in providing a bridge to spiritual direction, because it too is about giving attention, particularly to God. What people want is some help in giving attention to that which they sense matters, things to do with the state of their soul, features of the landscape of their lives that cannot be seen or noticed easily. The ministry of spiritual direction is but one expression of contemporary spirituality as described in these terms, a way to help people pay attention to God, to the 'Other'.

But the word 'spiritual' coupled with 'direction' can be misleading because it suggests that it deals with the more esoteric and less material aspects of human experience; it can drive an unwarranted wedge between the so-called sacred and secular. Evidence of the reality of this divide is seen when God's presence and experience of it through the Spirit is readily attributed and acknowledged in overtly Christian contexts like services of worship, personal devotional times or prayer meetings but not so much in the ordinary, everyday routines of life. We expect God to speak and guide in the former contexts, but then seem remarkably unexpectant of, or blind and deaf to, the Spirit of God's presence at work, in the home, shop, pub or leisure centre.

Jürgen Moltmann is keen to encourage Christians to be mindful and responsive to the presence and activity of God's Spirit at all times and in all places. According to him, part of the reason for a division between sacred and secular is the Western theological tradition inherited from a mixture of the teaching of Plato and

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[28] Leech, *Soul Friend,* Chapter 1, pp. 1-29, is a case in point. Even the most recent edition (1994) is dated in this area.

[29] Paul S. Fiddes, 'Baptists and Spirituality: A Rule of Life', in *Under the Rule of Christ: Dimensions of Baptist Spirituality,* ed. by Paul S. Fiddes (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 2008), pp. 1-13.

[30] Ibid., p. 25.

Augustine.[31] So, for example, Christian faith has had to resist the body-soul dualism of Plato for two millennia and insist that the physical world, including human beings, is God's good creation and not something evil to be escaped from into another-worldly spiritual existence. Sadly, today's Christians often fail to resist, and mistakenly concentrate on the 'spiritual' over and above the 'material', or regard the 'sacred' as of more value than the 'secular'.

Augustine's influence is seen in phrases such as 'Turn back into thyself: truth is to be found in the innermost man', or famously, 'Our hearts [souls] are restless till they find rest in Thee, for Thou hast made us for Thyself'.[32] The danger of such a focus on God and the soul, argues Moltmann, can lead 'to a devaluation of the body and of nature, *to a preference for inward, direct self-experience as a way to God*, and a neglect of sensuous experiences of sociality and nature'.[33] That is, the primary pathway to discovering God lay not outwardly but inwardly. Moltmann contests such a narrow view of the spiritual quest, a spirituality of the soul that searches for the 'other-worldly Spirit of the wholly other God'.[34] Rather, what is needed is a fully-rounded theology of the 'Spirit of Life' that recognises, experiences and celebrates the presence of God's Spirit *in all things*, not just a person's experience of the self.[35] God is infinitely beyond creation, mysterious and unfathomable in many respects, yet also is present and perceivable in creation. God's presence can be discovered not just in experience of self (as we delve inwards) but in each everyday experience of the interaction of self with and in the world of created things. Interestingly, John Wesley also taught the necessity of perceiving God in all things as a necessary part of faith. To separate some things but not others from God's realm and remit was 'practical atheism', he said. Instead, we should

> survey heaven and earth and all that is therein, as contained by God in the hollow of His hand, who by His intimate presence holds them all in being, who pervades and actuates the whole created frame and is, in a true sense, the soul of the universe.[36]

Thus, the word 'spiritual' in spiritual direction must not be interpreted narrowly. The latter is founded on a theology of the Holy Spirit and the task of the spiritual director is to help the directee pay attention to signs of that Spirit's presence and activity in the ordinary and everyday. The benefits of direction are seen when it starts to make a difference in the lives of directees as they notice and respond to God at work, how the Spirit is nudging and prompting in their worlds of labour and play, business and technology, justice and politics.

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[31] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (London: SCM Press, 1992), pp. 89-93. My train of thought in these two paragraphs is based on Reed, *Quest for Spiritual Community* (pp. 114-48), who turns to Moltmann in order to ground her discussion of spiritual guidance and direction in a Protestant theology.

[32] Ibid., p. 91.

[33] Ibid., p. 90 (my italics).

[34] Jürgen Moltmann, *A Broad Place: An Autobiography* (London: SCM Press, 2007), p. 349.

[35] As Reed points out in *Quest for Spiritual Community* (pp. 124-25) this is not pantheism, but panentheism.

[36] Quoted in Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, p. 317.

So it is heartening to read the comments from some of the ministers in the survey who indicated the all-encompassing range of subject matter for spiritual direction in phrases such as, '[...] encouraging reflective practice on life as it is lived', or another: 'Spirituality may be expressed in various ways, so "spiritual" in this context encompasses all of a person's life [...], the "ordinary, everyday" things of their lives'. Such observations echo Thomas Merton's story of the Russian s*taretz* who was chided by his colleagues for spending too much time talking with an old woman about the care of her turkeys. But he responded, 'Her whole life is in those turkeys'.[37]

A properly focussed *spiritual* direction therefore leads a person outwards to the world, not only inwards as self(centred)-awareness. As God's Spirit effects change in individuals, as they become increasingly attentive and responsive to God at work, not only within but also in the world, society itself can be seen for what it is, challenged and changed for the better. This is echoed by Jerry Gladson, writing from the perspective of the United Church of Christ, who emphasises the importance of spiritual direction in that denomination as it is outworked particularly in the realm of social justice.[38] And Alan Jones, so convinced that spiritual direction is able to change a person profoundly and consequently lead to the establishment of healthy, peaceable relationships in society, writes in extravagant language that it

> has political and social implications of tremendous importance because it is, of its very essence, an antidote to violence. It is a strategy of inner disarmament – the dismantling of the arsenal of destruction we amass inside ourselves.[39]

In summary, it is imperative that spiritual direction is understood not to be introspective, pious navel-gazing but outward-looking, engaging with society. The concerns and topics in *spiritual* direction are about the *whole* of life, encouraging directees to pay attention to the God who is present and at work in them and the world by the Spirit of Life, and to respond to the invitation to play their part in the *missio dei*.

What is meant by 'director'?

Just over half of the ministers who were surveyed chose 'spiritual director' as the term to describe their ministry; some added a caveat to explain this did not mean it was an authoritarian relationship, and that God the Holy Spirit is the true director who was guiding, challenging and transforming the directee. The (substantial) minority preferred to refer to themselves with another term that had fewer authoritative connotations; this was most frequently 'companion'. Why do ministers want to emphasise they are ‘standing alongside’ rather than ‘standing above’? Why a hesitancy to use the term *director*?

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[37] Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1960), p. 16.

[38] Jerry A. Gladson, 'Spiritual Direction, Social Justice, and the United Church of Christ', *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 30 (2002), pp. 346-54.

[39] Alan Jones, *Exploring Spiritual Direction* (New York: Seabury Press, 1982), p. ix.

Of course, part of our Baptist DNA is a conviction about the ‘priesthood of all believers’, and any suggestion that a spiritual director is somehow ‘standing above’ in an authoritative, mediatorial role is to be firmly resisted. That aside, it also perhaps reflects the spirit of our age regarding equality and power. The idea of directing someone is ‘alien to contemporary culture [...] suggesting as it does the rejection of personal responsibility and the acceptance of the authority of the one who does the directing’.[40] In addition, today’s Christians (in European and American society at least) are less accepting of authority figures than in times past because of the general erosion of trust in society and church.

Spiritual direction has also been influenced by contemporary psychological models such as Rogerian person-centred counselling, which has a non-authoritative, non-directive approach. One minister surprised herself that she chose to refer to herself as a director since ‘I come from a very person-centred way of working, and I do not feel particularly comfortable with being directive’.

Interestingly, Kathleen Fischer suggests that a more egalitarian understanding of the director-directee relationship is especially significant for women ‘since they are already conditioned to see themselves as inferior and to rely on powerful authority figures, usually men’.[41] That is, she suggests that women would be served better if a word other than ‘director’ were used, with all its implications of authority and hierarchy. Interestingly, the survey revealed that there was no marked difference between numbers of female and male spiritual directors choosing to refer to themselves as directors.

On the other hand, Margaret Guenther is not shy regarding what she sees as the unequal relationship that exists between director and directee. She says it is ‘unashamedly hierarchical’, although

> not because the director is somehow ‘better’ or ‘holier’ ... but because the director has agreed to put himself aside so that his total attention can be focussed on the person sitting in the other chair.[42]

Indeed, notwithstanding the hesitancies and cautions voiced above, for the Baptist ministers in this study, regardless of what they might call themselves, such is the nature of the relationship that unavoidably they have a degree of authority. As Rice observes, ‘Pastors have more authority than they know.’[43] Although there is the danger or accusation that a spiritual director supplants Christ or scripture as the important authorities in a believer’s life, in practice Baptists and other Protestants have long been ‘directed’ by authoritative figures, pastors and preachers through their sermons and writing. ‘Protestant pastors were no less powerful than Roman Catholic priests.’[44] Baptists are just as prone to being wrongly guided or manipulated through a controlling pastor or elder as is someone under a spiritual director; they have at times easily and uncritically submitted themselves to their favourite theologians, celebrity preachers and best-selling authors who have thereby, even if unintentionally, assumed a very directive role. In short, Baptist ministers acting as directors cannot disavow the authority this inevitably brings to the relationship; but hopefully, when they explicitly recognise and admit its presence, the danger of abusing their power is diminished and such authority is used as it should be, with care, humility and for the good of the other.

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[40] Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, p.10.

[41] Kathleen Fischer, *Women at the Well: Feminist Perspectives on Spiritual Direction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), p. 19.

[42] Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1993), p. 3.

[43] Howard L. Rice, *The Pastor as Spiritual Guide* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 1998), p. 180.

In fact, if one of the intentions of *Christian* spiritual direction is to encourage and enable a person’s walk with God to deepen under the rule of the Spirit of Christ, then there may be occasions where the director has to say something to correct an erroneous view, or challenge a particular behaviour that is not appropriate for one who claims to follow Jesus as Lord. The comment by one minister, ‘it means I can ask the “difficult questions”. I can challenge and encourage’, is perhaps an indication of this. Reed reports that she was told of a spiritual director who did nothing to discourage a Christian man from continuing in an extra-marital affair. The lack of challenge gave him full freedom to pursue his own quest with little concern for the way his actions might affect others.[45] Elsewhere she suggests that an explicit theology of sin and restoration (carefully expressed) is beneficial in matters of spiritual direction, if in part it is about the process of restoration in relationship with God. Obstacles that stand in the way of this need to be addressed.[46] Of course, this has to be done with sensitivity and care; the director is not to assume the position of God in the directee’s life, but rather as one disciple who accompanies another on the understanding that the latter wishes to grow in and deepen his or her relationship with God.

In conclusion, despite understandable criticisms and hesitancies, the responses from over half the ministers surveyed (including a significant number of women) show that the terms spiritual direction and spiritual director have a pedigree that is hard to ignore or dislodge. As one minister said, the latter is ‘widely understood within the spirituality community’ and although the nature of the relationship might need explaining, the term spiritual direction is ‘firmly entrenched in the tradition and is more widely and spontaneously used than any term that has been proposed to replace it’. [47] In my view it is hard to find another term that has the *gravitas* of what is intended – spiritual companion or friend suggest a different sort of relationship.

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[44] Ibid., p. 22.

[45] Reed, *Quest for Spiritual Community*, pp. 22-23.

[46] Ibid., pp. 142-43.

[47] Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, p. 11.

Tilden Edwards commented, '[after Vatican II] Protestants began to see that they perhaps had thrown out a lot of valuable gems at the Reformation because they had become tarnished beyond recognition'.[48] I believe that the role of the spiritual director was one such gem, and the recovery of spiritual direction by Baptists today is justified when properly understood and practised.

5. Towards an appropriate Baptist framework

Having argued that one-with-another spiritual direction, properly understood and practised, is a valid ministry for Baptists, in this last part we return to the report on Spurgeon's College in which it was recommended that 'the College is more intentional in alerting and enabling students to seek spiritual direction within *an appropriate Baptist framework*'.[49] What might that framework look like? As a first attempt at answering this, I will refer to some of the fundamentals distinctive to Baptists. How might they be seen in a spiritual direction relationship that would satisfy Baptist ideas of God and the church?

(a) Foundation: convictions

First, the research focussed on *Christian* spiritual direction, even though it is accepted that some directees may not yet have, or express, a sure faith in Jesus Christ. Christian spiritual direction without at least tacit acknowledgment of the *Lordship of Christ and authority of scripture* would not reflect Baptist convictions. The being and nature of God are revealed by the Holy Spirit in the person of Jesus and through scripture, and the behaviour and attitudes of the directee matter in the light of this revelation of Jesus as Lord. The intention of human directors as they journey with their directees is, to paraphrase some ministers surveyed, to encourage prayerful attention to God in all aspects of life, so that the God-directee relationship might deepen in obedient service and love. If Christ and scripture are not recognised as integral partners in the director-directee relationship, it would not be Christian spiritual direction, let alone Baptist. Interestingly (worryingly?), although directors wrote about the importance of discerning God's presence and activity in the life of a directee, there was little overt mention of the place of scripture beyond reference to the use of *lectio divina*. I am presuming the bible *is* used as a resource, particularly by directors trained in Ignatian spiritual direction in which scripture passages play a significant part in the spiritual exercises![50] Furthermore, to be true to Baptist convictions about the Lordship of Christ and authority of scripture – and to be true to the origins of spiritual direction and its practice whereby the directee was seeking to be an obedient follower of Jesus as Lord – direction should not be so influenced by person-centred counselling therapies (as it seemed to be from some responses in the survey) that attitudes and behaviour denying those convictions are ignored and left unaddressed (with the caveat, as noted earlier, that if it is necessary this is to be done carefully and lovingly). Baptist spiritual direction is to be *Christ*-centred, not person-centred.

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[48] Tilden Edwards, *Spiritual Friend: Reclaiming the Gift of Spiritual Direction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), p. 92.

[49] Briggs, *Inspection Report*, Recommendation 4, p. 17, (my italics).

[50] See David L. Fleming, *Draw Me Into Your Friendship: A Literal Translation and Contemporary Reading of the Spiritual Exercises* (Missouri: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), pp. 199-241.

Secondly, Baptists recognise that *all believers have access to God* without the need for a human mediator. Christ is that Mediator and it is his Spirit that grows and guides the relationship between directee and God. Although directors can be helpful in accompanying others to encourage a deepening relationship with God, they are not indispensable. The true Director is God; directors should point away from themselves towards God to whom the directee has unfettered access. A Baptist understanding of spiritual direction will be that the director and directee are fellow disciples, both seeking *God's* direction (although primarily for the directee); many of the ministers' responses in the survey indicated they saw themselves in this light.

Thirdly, ministry is not the province only of the ordained minister but *every member* has a part to play. With regard to spiritual direction not all Baptist ministers will act as formal directors – the survey identified only around forty Baptist ministers offering themselves as directors – and there may well be other members of the congregation who are skilled in and drawn to this ministry, who could be encouraged to pursue it on behalf of the church. One of the roles of ministers is to identify the people in their congregations who can serve God and their fellow believers in this way, to 'equip the saints to do the work of ministry' (Ephesians 4:12). A further area of research might be to investigate the prevalence of spiritual direction among members of the congregations of Baptist churches.

Fourthly, spiritual direction ought not to be compulsory, either for ministers or other Baptists. Each person has *freedom* to decide whether or not to engage in such a ministry. Not everyone's circumstances will allow it and not everyone is prepared to place himself or herself in a relationship such as formal direction. However, Rice believes that '*every pastor* would probably benefit from having a spiritual director'.[51] A number of ministers in the survey testified to the value and benefit of having a spiritual director themselves; the results showed too that about twenty-five per cent of the directees they see are Baptist ministers. 'Regular attention to the care of our own souls is not optional for pastors; it may be the only way we can continue the practice of ministry without losing our souls in the process'.[52] This concern is surely reflected in the Inspectors' recommendation to Spurgeon's College.

Fifthly, Baptists recognise they are *inter-dependent*: they can gain support and learn from other Baptists whether in their own or other churches, and likewise from brothers and sisters in Christ from other denominations. Catholics and Anglicans have a long tradition of spiritual direction, and Baptists would be foolish to ignore the wisdom they offer. The inter-dependent and ecumenical nature of spiritual direction was seen in the results of the survey. For instance, Baptist ministers trained and formed in direction have been so via Catholic or Anglican courses and in-service days; persons outside the denomination are directing some of our ministers, and Baptist ministers are directing non-Baptists. The principle of inter-dependence also implies rootedness of the spiritual director in a local church, working under its authority and with its blessing, which the ministers in the survey were. 'The spiritual director with an office down the street cannot begin to offer all the core features of spiritually formative relationships.'[53] A director should be in good relationship with his or her local church, not an independent, self-authorised, 'loose-cannon'.

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[51] Rice, *The Pastor as Spiritual Guide*, p. 72, my italics. Reed agrees in *Quest for Spiritual Community* (p. 170).

[52] Rice, *The Pastor as Spiritual Guide*, p. 161.

Lastly and importantly, Baptists are to be *missionary disciples*. Reed identifies three dimensions to spiritual direction: *personal*, *communal*, and *missional*, and urges that all three should be kept in balance with each other.[54] If it is to be practised on foundational Baptist convictions, the missional dimension must not be forgotten or lost in a purely private focus, or church-centred interest, but it should also lead outwards. As discussed above, spiritual direction concerns the whole of life. Ideally, one fruit of a soul that is growing and deepening in relationship with God through spiritual direction will be that others too become disciples of Jesus, both in the household of the faith, and in society at large. Furthermore, even though change in the latter will in all likelihood be slow and incremental, it is hoped that society will become fairer and more just, as was noted in the earlier discussion on what is meant by 'spiritual'. If it is faithful to Baptist foundations and done well, ministers and others who offer spiritual direction are helping to make missionary disciples.

In summary, where those features discussed above are present in the practice of spiritual direction, it can be said to be faithful to Baptist convictions about God and the church.

(b) Structures: practical wisdom

In addition to those foundations, perhaps three areas might be identified where there needs to be a measure of wisdom in how the ministry of spiritual direction by ministers and others is to be offered or received. In my view, further thought and discussion concerning these is essential as the practice of spiritual direction grows in our denomination.

Formation

As one minister noted, training does not make a spiritual director but it should not be eschewed as helpful in his or her formation: 'A training course does not make a spiritual accompanier though someone with the *charism* of spiritual accompaniment always needs to take advantage of getting some decent training!' It seems wise for some instruction in spiritual direction to be undertaken for a number of reasons: to give a theological rationale, to hone gifts and introduce new skills, to learn from others experienced in the field, and to gain confidence and affirmation. Likewise, in-service training days are useful as a means of on-going formation. It is encouraging that, as we have seen, nearly all ministers in the survey have undertaken some kind of initial training and continue to be formed through occasional days and courses.

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[53] Reed, *Quest for Spiritual Community*, p. 158.

[54] Ibid., p. 10.

Whether or not a training course written and offered by Baptists is necessary is questionable. There is much to be said in favour of the ecumenical nature of many of the training courses currently offered by Anglicans or Catholics, of which our ministers avail themselves; they have a long and mature history to draw on regarding this ministry, which Baptists do not. As with any training, not all courses or their content are equally valuable, but spiritual directors should be sufficiently mature to be able to respond appropriately if they encounter some content about which they are cautious.[55]

Supervision

It is good to note that most of the ministers are members of a peer supervision group or use their own director for this. It is wise in a one-to-one relationship such as spiritual direction, which is sometimes intense and deeply personal, that directors make themselves accountable to another through some form of supervision, because they have the potential to harm the directee through clumsy use of language, their own distorted images of God, not understanding or abusing their power in the relationship, lack of self-awareness, and in many other ways. Essentially, supervision has the well-being of both director and directee at its heart. Some models might focus on the inner life of the director as the substance of the supervision conversation; others on the directee in respect of his or her well-being. Mary Rose Bumpus suggests that one’s own spiritual director is the one to help with the former, and that supervision ought to be more concerned with the latter.[56]

On the whole the impression from the survey is that the availability of supervisors and the effectiveness of supervision arrangements seem somewhat patchy and unsatisfactory. As was noted, a few directors used their own director as a supervisor, others were members of a peer supervision group, and a sizeable minority currently had no supervisor. To my knowledge, a peer supervision group specifically for Baptists does not exist in any Association, and there is no easy way to access either a peer supervision group, or locate a supervisor for spiritual directors. Also, as one minister noted one-to-one supervision can be ‘enormously expensive’. However, the local Anglican diocese can usually offer assistance and Baptist directors could seek their advice.

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[55] For example, some prayer exercises suggested in Ignatian spiritual direction may attribute to Mary, mother of Jesus, more authority than many Baptists would be happy with.

[56] Mary Rose Bumpus, ‘Supervision: The Assistance of an Absent Other’, in *Supervision of Spiritual Directors: Engaging in Holy Mystery*, ed. by Mary Rose Bumpus and Rebecca Bradburn Langer (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2005), pp. 3-15 (p. 5). Much more could be said about the nature and place of supervision in spiritual direction than is possible in this paper. Pickering, *Spiritual Direction*, pp. 138-39, also discusses briefly the merits of both peer and one-to-one supervision.

Accreditation

As spiritual direction among Baptists grows in popularity and more ministers and other Baptists offer themselves as directors, what guarantees are there of the quality of the ministry? One respondent expressed her unease in this way:

> I am also concerned that the quality of direction offered is very variable. I have heard about some awful practice from my five people and also from other ministers and friends. I recognise the issues around formally recognising SD as a ministry but I do think that if people get a bad experience from someone who is untrained, unsupervised, etc. then it can put them off accessing a potentially useful tool.

If Baptist spiritual directors were ever to be formally recognised or accredited, what criteria might be used to assess their suitability, and who would be the ‘gatekeepers’? It might be wise to give some thought as to the nature of the endorsement that can be given in order that someone recommending or seeking a spiritual director can have confidence in that person. Criteria for directors might include requirements that they are in direction themselves; that they are under supervision; that they show evidence of training and completion of a recognised course, with commitment to on-going formation; that they are members of an active worshipping community; that they satisfy safeguarding protocols.[57]

Not all will welcome what they see as an over-professionalisation and regulation of this ministry. Leech expressed his horror at what he saw (in 1977) concerning the trend in America towards this, with the establishing of Spiritual Directors International with accompanying certificates, fees and institutionalisation.[58] However, given current concerns about safeguarding, of wanting to encourage competency and vouchsafe those who offer spiritual direction, some research and discussions about this important aspect are probably necessary.

6. Conclusion

This research has uncovered something of the nature of the contemporary practice of spiritual direction among Baptist ministers and I have offered some preliminary reflection on it. As explained above, it is a ministry that has a justifiable place among Baptists and the latter paragraphs have been a first attempt at suggesting a Baptist framework, founded on some core convictions and erected using some practical wisdom. Questions have arisen in the course of the above discussion that merit further investigation. Others involved in this ministry will no doubt have further ideas. Hopefully this study will stimulate further engagement with and reflection on spiritual direction within our denomination, for the growth of the Kingdom of God.

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[57] These and other criteria are currently being suggested in the Lincoln Diocese as appropriate in order for persons to be included in the diocesan directory of spiritual directors.

[58] Leech, *Soul Friend*, p. xvi.

The Revd Dr Tim Mountain, Tutor at Northern Baptist Learning Community, Manchester.